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## Great Expectations

**A longitudinal case study of pupils in an inner-city secondary school in a 'high-NEET' Local Authority in England**

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*Awarding institution:*  
King's College London

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Great Expectations: A longitudinal case study of pupils in an inner-city secondary  
school in a 'high-NEET' Local Authority in England

Ann McDonnell

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of a degree of  
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## Abstract

This study focuses on secondary school pupils in an inner-city area in which young people are at high risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) after leaving school. It was an ESRC CASE Studentship undertaken in collaboration with the Local Authority in which the school is located. The study explores these pupils' aspirations for education, work and life over a 4-year period. It is located within a comparative case study paradigm, comparing pupils deemed by their school to be at either high or low risk of becoming NEET, using a mixed methods approach encompassing focus groups, survey and participant observation. The interplay between environment, behaviour and personal aspects is explored through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory. The study places these young people's voices at the centre in the belief that their experiences and aspirations may illuminate current debates and add to the sparse literature on young people at risk of becoming NEET. This is an essential piece of the NEET 'jigsaw'.

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I was also like to thank my wonderful supportive husband Dave, who is my rock, my lovely sister Dawn who spent many a long night reading drafts and just being there for me and Beth and Karen, long-time friends whose support was invaluable. I would also like to thank my three sons, their wives, and my grandchildren for putting up with me and my continual distraction.

## Dedication

To my Mum and Dad, who, in their own ways, supported me, in my pursuit to become more than was expected.

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## Preface

This thesis is inextricably linked with my personal and professional story, so I have decided to begin this thesis by introducing myself in relation to my study.

### My story

I was born in 1963 to a working-class family and lived just outside a large city in England. At 16 I left my local comprehensive secondary school with five General Certificate in Education (GCE) Ordinary ('O') Level passes. Although I was interested in staying on at school to study for GCE Advanced ('A') Level examinations, I did not do so as all my friends and family left school at 16 or younger and worked. As a girl in a working-class family I was expected to work for a few years and then marry and have children, and this was also my expectation. I worked in a variety of office jobs and, in 1983 and 1984, had two spells of unemployment. I realised that one way to avoid further unemployment was to gain qualifications. I had always had ambitions to become a teacher but had no idea how to do this, and as time went on I became less confident that someone from my background could become a teacher. At 22, with the help and support of my future husband, I began to realise that this was achievable. After having my first child in 1987 I returned to education part-time to gain a GCSE in Mathematics and, following the birth of my second child in 1989, I enrolled in an Access course at the local college. At this time, colleges and the government were encouraging young women to go back to education. The fee for the Access college course was affordable (£10) as I was categorised as unwaged. I also worked voluntarily at the local adult college helping adults with their numeracy skills. Following the successful completion of this course, I went on to complete my first degree at the local university. There were crèche facilities available for my second child and the cost of this was covered by the maintenance grant I received; I did not have to pay tuition fees for the course. During this time, I started paid work at the local adult college, teaching Numeracy. On completion of my degree, I had my third child and extended my work at the college teaching Numeracy, Sociology and History to adult students. Later, I completed a Masters in Emotional Factors in Learning and Teaching at the local university, studying part-time while continuing to work in the

Local Authority covering the area I lived in. Altogether, I was employed by this Local Authority for 24 years, working mainly in adult (16+) education.

In 2006 I became the Functional Skills Lead within the Local Authority's Schools and Community Advisory Service. This work highlighted how many young people were leaving school without basic qualifications in mathematics and English. I saw that teachers, career advisors and other professionals (myself included) often adopted a pragmatic, individualistic approach by intervening to prevent a pupil seen as at risk of becoming NEET (not in employment, education or training) from becoming disengaged. This might include securing a work placement, providing extra lessons or extra-curricular activities, or providing a mentor or other support. While such interventions might be effective for a particular pupil at a particular time in a particular context, I considered them to be micro-solutions to the macro-problem of NEETness: necessary but not sufficient. Reflecting on my own story, I saw that gaining qualifications had enabled me to secure a better future for myself and my family. I had taken opportunities that came my way, within a strong supportive personal relationship, at a time when government policy supported access to higher education by 'non-traditional' students through minimising barriers of cost and childcare (Wakeford, 1993). My experience showed me the transformative nature of gaining qualifications, an individual achievement, while also indicating how government policy impacts on an individual's choices and opportunities.

In 2007, through my association with an international research forum, Adults Learning Mathematics ([www.alm-online.net](http://www.alm-online.net)), which brings practitioners and researchers together to effectively inform practice, I began to investigate the long-term effects of low basic skills in relation to employment and training opportunities. As the NEET consultant within the Local Authority, I worked with the Local Authority's 14-19 Strategy Team and I developed and piloted one of the first 'Risk of NEET Indicator' (RONI) tools (Filmer-Sankey & McCrone, 2012) in the country.

Meanwhile, I successfully completed my Masters in Research in Education and Social Science at King's College London, and in my second year I applied for and won funding through an ESRC CASE Studentship (reference: ESG035911/1) to undertake this PhD in collaboration with my employer, the Local Authority. The

focus of the Studentship was identifying young people at risk of becoming NEET in the Local Authority and intervening appropriately to widen their opportunities and choices. Initially, the Local Authority envisaged the study as an evaluation of initiatives aiming to minimize the number of young people becoming NEET in the area, using the RONI I had developed to track pupils deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET. However, shortly after starting my PhD I became ill and was diagnosed with a chronic condition. This led to a year of sickness and an interruption of my studies.

I returned to work part-time in October 2010 to find the Local Authority in chaos due to public service cuts and reorganisation on an unprecedented scale. This led eventually to my redundancy in July 2011. However, the Local Authority remained committed to the study and, with the agreement of both CASE Partners, the focus of my study shifted away from a largely quantitative Local Authority-wide study, while remaining focused on the Local Authority's aim of minimizing the number of young people becoming NEET in their area. One secondary school in the Local Authority became the focus of the research as it became a smaller-scale, mixed methods (mainly qualitative) study, bringing to the fore the voices of the pupils, their experiences and aspirations as young people growing up in a high-NEET area. Following my redundancy, my role as a researcher and occasional NEET consultant for the Local Authority necessitated a negotiated approach to maintain the cooperation and involvement of the school in a mutually productive way.

## The problem

NEET young people<sup>1</sup> are more likely to have poor life outcomes, including recurring unemployment and poor physical and mental health, thus the financial costs to the government, to the individual and to society may continue far beyond the initial episode of NEETness (Coles, Godfrey, Keung, Parrott & Bradshaw, 2010). Preventing NEETness has thus become a priority of government, especially since the publication of the government's strategy to reduce the number of NEET young people (DCSF, 2008a). Successive governments have monitored numbers and sought

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I use the terms 'young people' or 'pupils' to refer to those who are the focus of my study, including my research participants. When I cite an external source, I use the term used in that source, which may be: 'children'; 'pupils'; students; 'young people'; or some other term.

to identify the characteristics of young people who *are* NEET. Lists of risk factors attempting to determine the probability of young people *becoming* NEET have been created (Southcott, Stevens, Featherstone & McCrone, 2013). This is problematic because those with no risk factors may still become NEET and ‘high-risk’ young people do not inevitably become NEET (Southcott, et al, 2013). Nevertheless, government policies and associated national and local intervention programmes have concentrated on mitigating these risk factors and identifying young people in their early teens who are at risk of becoming NEET; one such local initiative features in this study. Meanwhile, the voices of young people in high-NEET areas, including those identified as being at risk of becoming NEET, have not been heard. This is an essential piece of the ‘NEET jigsaw’ and it is a missing piece. This study aims to supply this ‘missing piece’, or at least begin to do so, by asking: what are these young people’s aspirations? Are aspirations different for those deemed at risk of becoming NEET and those not so identified, when both groups are in a high-NEET area? Thus, my overarching research question is:

How do pupils of a secondary school in an inner-city Local Authority with a large number of NEETs, perceive their experience of school and their aspirations in relation to their future prospects for education, work and life?

My subsidiary research questions are:

- What are pupils’ aims, aspirations and ambitions? Do they change over time? Do they differ between those identified as at risk of becoming NEET and those not so identified?
- How do pupils engage with school-led interventions designed to mitigate their perceived risk of becoming NEET?
- How do pupils attending school-led interventions designed to mitigate their risk of becoming NEET talk about their future prospects for work, education, and life as compared to those not identified as at risk?

These research questions are discussed in full in Chapter 4.

The location of the study in the research time-frame

This study was undertaken in a Local Authority with a high number of NEETs in a large city in England. The main data collection took place over the period 2010-



2014. The population of the Local Authority area was approximately 200,000 in 2010. From 2001 to 2010 the Local Authority had seen rapid population growth and there had been a large increase in the numbers of young people living in the Local Authority area. The proportions of various ethnic groups had changed, with a large decrease in the White British group, large increases in the Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic groups and White Other. In 2003, 80 percent of residents of all ages were from a White British background whereas in 2013 half the population (50 percent) was from a White British background. School Census figures indicate that 60 percent of pupils enrolled in the Local Authority's schools in 2013 were from a non-White British background.

In 2015 the Index of Multiple Deprivation located the Local Authority in the top 15 percent of most deprived Local Authorities in England (DCLG, 2015). Research in 2006 found that approximately 40 percent of children under the age of five in the Local Authority lived in a workless household and in 2009 the School Census identified approximately 25 percent of children as eligible for free school meals (FSM) across all schools, compared to 15 percent nationally (DCLG, 2015). Approximately one third of adults in the Local Authority had no qualifications or known level of education, compared to 23 percent nationally (DCLG, 2015). In May 2014 there were 526 NEET young people aged 16-18 years in the Local Authority, which is 6.6 percent of the total 16–18-year-old population in the Local Authority. In addition, there was a significant number of young people aged 16-18 years whose NEET status was unknown. The quarterly rate for young people unknown to local services was 14.5 percent in Quarter 3 of the academic year 2011/12. 12.3 percent of 18-24-year-olds in the Local Authority were unemployed compared to the national average of 8.1 percent and the London average of 7.6 percent. The youth unemployment rate in the Local Authority had risen faster than the London and national averages over the previous three years, from 8.9 percent in January 2009 to 12.3 percent in 2014, which indicates that young people were entering an increasingly competitive job market.

### The school

The school that is at the centre of this research is situated in a deprived area within a challenging socio-economic area and it reflects the ethnic balance of the Local

Authority's population. The school is a comprehensive maintained school<sup>2</sup> with a 10-form entry and 1800 pupils. The school has more pupils entitled to FSM than average and the average income in the ward it is situated in is one of the lowest in the city of which it is a part. In 2013, 63 percent of pupils gained five GCSEs at grades A\*-C, including Mathematics and English, while the national average was 68.1 percent, and the Government's Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) rated the school as 'Good' in its inspection in 2013.

### The study

This study was undertaken through an ESRC CASE Studentship as a collaboration between a Local Authority with a high number of NEETs (the non-academic CASE Partner) and King's College London (the academic CASE Partner). Ethical approval for the study was granted by King's College London Research Ethics Committee (SSHL/07/08-49) in 2008. Access to and permission to use the data examined in this study are included in the ESRC CASE Studentship Agreement between the Local Authority and King's College London.

### What difference could my research make?

The research will contribute new knowledge about young people's transitions to adulthood in a deprived urban educational setting. In particular, through identifying differences and similarities of the perceived experiences of schooling and aspirations for education, work and life between young people deemed at risk or not at risk of becoming NEET, as they grew from age 13 to age 17 in a high-NEET context, it will contribute to discussions about young people in such contexts. While there have been several studies of NEET young people, as well as research to understand the experiences, aims, attitudes and aspirations of young people (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell, 2017; Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012; Gorard, See & Davies 2012; Kintrea, St. Clair & Houston 2011; Todd, 2012), the voices of young people, including those deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET, have not been adequately represented, especially in terms of how they experience school.

The study will be relevant to: the Local Authority (CASE non-academic partner), to

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<sup>2</sup> In England, a maintained comprehensive school is a state school that does not select its intake on the basis of academic achievement or aptitude and is supported by the Local Authority.

inform its approach towards young people, especially NEETs, within its boundaries; the participating school, to gain insight into pupils' aims, attitudes and aspirations and how they experience the interventions designed to minimise their risk of becoming NEET; education professionals, policy makers, researchers and charitable organisations, to increase their understanding of the NEET phenomenon and interventions designed to improve education, employment and training outcomes for young people; and last but not least, to young people: to give them hope.

I will disseminate the findings of my research to the Local Authority and the school, each of which will receive a copy of the final thesis, and to academic, policy and practitioner audiences through educational and policy fora, including conferences, seminars and professional and academic journal articles. I am also considering ways of communicating my findings to young people more generally, including through social media.

### The order of the chapters

This research was undertaken as a collaborative CASE studentship, and as explained above, changed direction, which necessitated changes to the research questions and, research site. Furthermore, this led to an approach more consistent with Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) than an evaluative study. Whilst I was somewhat familiar with the concept of and debates around NEETs, I had little experience of theoretical perspectives. The theoretical perspective emerged through my exploration and coding of my data. I have chosen to present my chapters in an order that places the theoretical perspective in what I consider the most appropriate place to develop the overall arguments of this thesis. This will be discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4.

### Chapter 1 Literature review

In this chapter I discuss the term NEET, its origins, how it has been conceptualised and how it is used, for what and for whose purposes. I will examine how neoliberalism and the concept of social justice have featured in discourses around NEETs. In this study I use the term 'discourse' (albeit with a lower case 'd') in the sense that Gee (1999) identifies as capital 'D' Discourse. By this he means the

combination of language and social practices which take place within Discourse Communities. I explore how changes to the education system may have helped or hindered some young people at risk of becoming NEET and explore how social constructs are connected to individuals' actions.

## Chapter 2 Statistics and the Risk of NEET Indicator tool

In this chapter, I examine publications that use data from two large surveys: The Youth Cohort Survey (YCS) Cohort 13 and Next Steps, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (hereinafter LSYPE) (DCSF/ONS, 2008, 2009; DfE/ONS, 2010, 2011). I go on to explain how RONIs became common in 2008 and how the Local Authority used a RONI to identify pupils deemed at risk of becoming NEET. Some of these pupils became the subject of an intervention programme, observation of which formed part of the research data collection.

## Chapter 3 Theoretical perspective

This chapter explores Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) and its relevance to this research. I show how Bandura's (1986) concept of Triadic Reciprocal Determinism (TRD), with its emphasis on the reciprocal nature of behaviour, environment, and personal aspects of the self, allows me to explore the connection between macro-level influences; history, policy and cultural aspects, on the micro-level experiences of the participants of this research. Furthermore, my exploration of the elements of agency and self-efficacy within SCT provide the background theoretical basis for my analysis of the experiences of the participants.

## Chapter 4 Research Design and Methodologies

In this chapter I explore the ontological and epistemological position of this research. I discuss the ethical issues that arose and how they were addressed. I give detailed explanations of why certain methods were chosen to answer the research question and how they were administered. I explain how the data were analysed through a broadly thematic structure. Lastly, I offer some critical reflection on the choice of tools, the decisions made, and the processes used to analyse the data.

## Chapter 5 Presentation of my findings

### *Section 1 Presentation of my quantitative data*

In this section I examine the data gathered through questionnaires which were answered by one cohort of pupils in one school over a four-year period. These questionnaires were designed to ascertain pupils' aims, ambitions and aspirations and to track changes as the cohort matured. I examine these data using frequency tables and statistical testing made possible using the SPSS<sup>®</sup> programme.

### *Section 2 Presentation of focus group data*

In this section I present the spoken words of the participants from the focus groups using five narrative descriptors which I have called codes: school purpose; school reality; expectations; anxiety; and othering. These are divided into subcategories and as such provide an in-depth account of this rich data source. I have chosen to present my data in this transparent way and share the process through the stages to enhance the reliability and validity of this study.

### *Section 3 Presentation of observations of interventions*

My participant observation of interventions took place over two academic years from November 2011 to May 2013 with a group of pupils who were deemed by the school to be at risk of becoming NEET. To present and examine these observations I describe the contexts, setting and aims of the Intervention Class. I then give a detailed account of selected interactions between pupils and facilitators of the Intervention Class.

## Chapter 6 Analysis and Discussion

In this chapter I consider my findings from all my datasets. I begin with a discussion of the quantitative findings. I explore the implications of this dataset for my research. I then explore the data through the theoretical lens of TRD and SCT whilst paying particular attention to the two themes that emerged from my qualitative coding: agency and self-efficacy. I use the young people's voices and behaviour to present evidence of their developing direct personal agency. I extend this analysis by examining a selection of their comments in relation to how they perceive the environment in which they are situated. I then comment on the aspects and levels of pupils' self-efficacy that I observed in the interventions. I examine the presence and

importance of proxy agency within this dataset. Within these discussions I draw attention to the similarities and differences between participants in the four focus groups and those deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET and those deemed not to be at risk. Alongside this, I also consider the significance of my findings in relation to the wider literature reviewed in Chapter 1 and referred to throughout this thesis.

## Chapter 7 Contribution to knowledge and reflections

In this chapter I summarise my findings and my contribution to knowledge in relation to my research questions and within the wider context of the debates and research I have highlighted in Chapters 1 and 2. I reflect on the findings, analysis and discussion of this research and describe the limitations present and set out some recommendations for stakeholders and for further research.

## Chapter 1: Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant literature to set the scene for the study and make clear the gap in the literature that this study aims to begin to fill. The first part focuses on issues in the conceptualization of two closely-linked phenomena that underpin the study: NEET and Risk of NEET. A brief discussion follows on how neoliberalism has featured in discourses around NEETs and played out in government policy in England during the period of the study. The second section outlines relevant government policy and reviews research relevant to the study.

### NEET: issues in conceptualisation

This section explores issues in conceptualisation of the term NEET, its origins, how it is used, for what and for whose purposes. In this context I examine neoliberalism and how the growth of neoliberalism has contributed to discourses around NEETs. I explore how changes to the education system may have helped or hindered some young people at risk of becoming NEET and consider whether a move away from a collective approach towards a greater emphasis on individuality has played a part in how some young people react to ‘failure’ or aspire to be successful. This is necessary in order to inform my research and support my reflections as I observe and interpret the experiences of the young people from age 13 to 17, as they approach the threshold of adult life.

#### NEET: concepts and definitions

The term NEET has emerged against the background of increasing public concern about the poor outcomes of compulsory education for some young people. As Simmons (2010) has pointed out, the emergence of the NEET category is associated with far-reaching social, economic and political shifts over the past thirty years, with discourses of globalisation, individualisation and the skills agenda becoming increasingly prominent from the 1990s onwards. These shifts he characterises as moving from concern about poverty to concern about social exclusion and youth disengagement and from concern about youth unemployment to concern about young people being NEET. Furthermore, the removal of welfare benefits from most 16 to 18-year-olds in England in 1988 marked a shift in focus from employment to education as the primary post-16 destination for young people (Simmons, 2010).

In 1997 the incoming New Labour government set up the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU), based in the Cabinet Office and reporting to the Prime Minister. Social exclusion was defined as:

A shorthand label for what can happen when individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown.

(SEU, 1997, p.2)

The SEU aimed to offer solutions to social exclusion and to promote more joined-up approaches to tackling social exclusion across government departments. By the end of 1998 the SEU had issued three reports: *Truancy and School Exclusion* (SEU, 1998a); *Rough Sleeping* (SEU, 1998b); *Bringing Britain Together: A national strategy for neighbourhood renewal* (SEU, 1998c). Together these reports highlighted the vulnerability of young people and the negative consequences of truancy and school exclusion. These reports were followed in 1999 by *Bridging the Gap*, a policy review and action document which addressed the rising concern for those young people aged 16 to 18 who were not in education, work or training (SEU, 1999). According to Simmons (2010), the acronym NEET was coined by a Home Office official in 1996 as a more neutral alternative to the term “Status Zero” used by Rees, Williamson and Istance (1996) in their study of jobless school leavers in South Wales but it seems to have first appeared in print in *Bridging the Gap* (SEU, 1999).

*Bridging the Gap* made recommendations to help young people get into education, training and work with four main areas of support: (i) financial assistance (ii) a variety of pathways into education (iii) a support system for those who are disengaged and (iv) good information and guidance for all young people to establish clear personal goals (SEU, 1999, p.9). It aimed “to ensure that young people stay in education, training, or work with a strong education/training component until they are at least 18” (SEU 1999, p.9).

With the publication of *Bridging the Gap*, NEET became a ‘destination descriptor’ for policy-makers, government and the media: a category to which some young



people were assigned at age 16, 17 or 18. Thereafter, NEET statistics for England have been published by the government on a quarterly basis and targets have been set for Local Authorities to decrease the number of NEETs in their areas through Local Area Agreements (LAA)<sup>3</sup>. This target setting has strongly influenced Local Authorities' and schools' approaches to NEET reduction, in that initiatives have largely been framed in terms of solutions at an individual level rather than at a systems level, or a broader social or economic level.

Meanwhile, in 2012 the International Labour Office (ILO) published a formula for calculating the percentage of NEETs in a given population as follows:

$$\text{NEET (\%)} = \frac{\text{Number of unemployed youth} + \text{Number of youth not economically active} - (\text{Number of youth not economically active and unemployed youth who are in education or training})}{\text{Total number of youth}} \times 100$$

Figure 1: International Labour Organisation NEET Indicator (ILO 2012, p.51)

Although this seems clear it is only one way of calculating NEETs and in 2013 the ILO published a new, broader formulation: the NLEET rate, referring to those neither in the labour force nor in education, employment or training. The NLEET rate excludes the unemployed since they are included in the labour force (ILO, 2013). The use of the acronym NEET is not consistent, as in one study or set of statistics a young person may be classed as NEET, whilst in another setting the same young person may not be categorised as NEET, or NLEET. This issue is explored next.

First there is the issue of the age range covered by the term NEET. The acronym could feasibly be used for any age group as it simply describes a person's educational and employment status, albeit in negative terms: what a person is not

<sup>3</sup> Local Area Agreements (LAA) were plans that combined national government standards and priorities with the vision and priorities of the local areas, introduced for each local authority area in England and Wales in 2000 as a result of the Local Government Act (2000) <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/22/contents>. LAAs were abolished in 2010.

doing rather than what they are doing (Yates & Payne, 2006, p.342). In reality the acronym is applied to young people exclusively; for example, a 40-year-old at home looking after children is not categorised by government or surveys as NEET, but rather as a carer or unemployed. This practice may reflect ongoing public concern, since at least the Industrial Revolution, about young people not adopting the values and activities of adult society and so not becoming full citizens (McDonald & Marsh, 2005, p.376). This concern is evident in a Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) Research Paper that stated:

The high number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is a prominent feature of the challenging economic environment in the UK. Increasing young people's participation in learning, skills training and work is central to addressing this issue as well as stimulating economic growth and facilitating social mobility. The scale of youth unemployment is shaping current policy and practice.  
(McCrone, Southcott, Featherstone, Macleod & Dawson, 2013, p.7)

While NEET consistently refers to young people, the age range covered by the term varies. Until May 2013 government departments gathered statistics on 16-18 year old NEETs in England; since May 2013 the age range has been extended to include 16-24-year-olds (ONS, 2013).

The scope of the term NEET also varies in other ways. For example, statistics may include young people who are not actively seeking employment, education or training. They may be pregnant or caring for children, disabled or sick, travelling, caring for a relative, volunteering, pursuing other interests or in custody (ONS 2017). The NEET categorisation does not distinguish between those who are disadvantaged and/or vulnerable and trying to negotiate transitions, and those who are more privileged and who have the means to make active choices (for example, young people choosing to travel, take a 'gap year' or internship or pursue other interests). Critics such as Furlong (2006, p.556) argue that this indiscriminate use of the term NEET detracts from its usefulness, not just for researchers and policy makers, but also for interventions that aim to improve outcomes for vulnerable youth.

In the absence of a consistent definition, researchers have developed their own interpretations of the meaning of NEET in order to validate their sample populations and illuminate the experiences of their subjects. For instance, Croxford and Raffe (2000, p.3) refer to “broad” and “narrow” NEETs: the *broad* definition encompasses all young people classed as NEET and *narrow* refers to young people who are just unemployed. In other research, Bentley and Gurumurthy (1999, p.6) estimated that one in ten young people were “off register”, i.e., not registered as in school or college or employed. Their definition of NEET excludes the disabled and the long-term sick, while the government’s use of the term NEET *does* include the disabled and long-term sick. Bynner and Parsons (2002, p.298) use yet another definition of NEET: those aged 16 to 18 who have not been in education, employment or training for at least six months. Spielhofer, Benton, Evans, Featherstone, Golden, Nelson, Smith (2009) characterize NEETs in three groups: open to learning; undecided NEET; and sustained NEET. Yet another distinction is made between NEETs, especially in relation to European statistics, where some young people are described as “poorly integrated new entrants” who for the most part have qualifications yet experience difficulties finding sustained employment, by contrast with those who are NEET who are described as “left behind”. These NEET young people are characterized by their lack of qualifications, disadvantaged backgrounds and location in rural areas (Eurofound, 2012). Also Eurofound’s NEET definition includes youth aged between 15 and 29. This matters as United Kingdom (UK) NEET rates<sup>4</sup> are compared and examined alongside other European Union member states (Eurofound, 2012).

The inclusion of NEET in the United Nation’s (UN’s) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) may lead to stabilisation of the definition (United Nations Statistics Division, 2018) in accordance with SDG Target 8.6: “By 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training” (United Nations Statistics Division, 2016). The UN uses the ILO’s 2012 definition of NEET (see above).

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<sup>4</sup> Eurofound (2012) statistics refer to the UK; separate data for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not given.

Elder's 2015 analysis of the NEET concept as applied in seven countries finds that:

there is a great deal of complexity in the analysis and interpretation of NEET rates. Diverse policy implications arise based on the shares of the two components – unemployed and inactive non-student youth – and how the rates and their compositions compare between sexes and across age groups.

(Elder, 2015, p.8)

The UK government's definition of NEET is set out as follows in the latest Office of National Statistics Statistical Release:

**Definition of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)**

**Young people**

For this release, young people are defined as those aged 16 to 24. Estimates are also produced for the age groups 16 to 17 and 18 to 24 and broken down by sex.

**Education and training**

A person is considered to be in education or training if any of the following apply:

- they are enrolled on an education course and are still attending or waiting for term to (re)start
- they are doing an apprenticeship
- they are on a government-supported employment or training programme
- they are working or studying towards a qualification
- they have had job-related training or education in the last 4 weeks

**Employment**

"In employment" includes all people in some form of paid work, including those working part-time. People not in employment are classed as either unemployed or economically inactive. Unemployed people are those who have been looking for work in the past 4 weeks and who are available to start work within the next 2 weeks. Economically inactive people are those who have not been looking for work and/or who are not available to start work. Examples of economically inactive people include those not looking for work because they are students and those who are looking after dependants at

home. These definitions are based on those recommended by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

### **NEET**

Anybody who is not in any of the forms of education or training listed above and not in employment is considered to be NEET. Consequently, a person identified as NEET will always be either unemployed or economically inactive.

(ONS, 2017)

This definition is included to show the full scope of the NEET definition in play in the UK.

The compilation of NEET statistics and the anomalies within them are discussed in Chapter 2. This brief review shows that there is no consensus on the age or circumstances of those falling within the NEET category. Varying definitions make it difficult to compare policies and research findings, to have a coherent understanding of the issues and debates, to understand the characteristics of NEETs and whether, and if so what kind of intervention might be necessary to prevent NEETness. The NEET phenomenon is nevertheless clearly an issue of public concern.

### **Outline of relevant government policy**

This section discusses UK government policies applicable in England<sup>5</sup>, together with related publications, with a particular focus on those policies extant at the time of my research data collection: 2010-2014. These constitute the national environment that influenced policies within the Local Authority and the school at the centre of my study. The young people in my study were situated in this policy landscape; their experiences cannot be divorced from the time in which they took place.

Successive UK governments have aimed to minimize the number of young people becoming NEET because being NEET is strongly associated with adverse economic,

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<sup>5</sup> The UK government is responsible for educational provision in England. Since 1999, in Scotland Wales and Northern Ireland education has become the responsibility of devolved governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

social and health outcomes (Coles et al., 2010; Furlong 2006; Gregg & Tominey, 2005). Since the turn of the present century various policies and approaches have been developed to reduce the number of NEETs, including the Connexions service of information, advice, guidance and support for young people aged 13 to 19 (up to 25 for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities), created in 2000 following the Learning and Skills Act (UK Government, 2000). In 2008 the government strategy to reduce NEETs was:

based on three key elements: careful tracking of young people to identify their needs; a flexible mix of learning provision designed to meet the needs of every young person in every area; and good advice and support to enable young people to access suitable provision.

(DCSF, 2008b, p.9)

Local Authorities have a statutory duty to provide strategic leadership to support participation in education, training and employment and collect information about all young people and maintain a tracking system so that those who are NEET can be identified and given support to re-engage. Accordingly, Local Authorities' Local Area Agreements, including targets for NEET reduction and NEET targets, have been set by governments as part of successive Spending Reviews. From 2000, new independent state-funded schools known as academies have been introduced in England, operating outside Local Authority control (Miller, 2011). While Local Authorities are required to provide programmes for young people at risk of being NEET there is no such requirement for academies. There were no academies in the Local Authority in this study at the time of my data collection.

From 2004 to 2010 the Education Maintenance Allowance offered a means-tested weekly payment of up to £30 to young people continuing their education past the statutory leaving age in England. In 2007 16-year-old school leavers were guaranteed a suitable learning place in September and this was extended to 17-year-olds in 2008 and remains in place today (DfE, 2014a).

The government publication *Building Engagement, Building Futures* presented the Coalition government's position on NEETs in England (HM Government, 2011). In this report the term NEET is used to describe 16 to 19-year-olds, 16 to 24-year-olds

and 18 to 24-year-olds who are not in education, employment or training. Of particular interest to my study are the following statements in the report. The government:

- will provide £4.5 million over the next two years to give more 16 to 19-year-olds access to work experience (HM Government, 2011, p.53);
- will fund charities and businesses to help the most disengaged 16 to 17-year-olds get skills and jobs. As part of the Youth Contract, £150 million will be available over the next three years to get the most vulnerable and disengaged young people back in education, onto an apprenticeship or into sustainable employment (HM Government, 2011, p.61);
- has launched a National Careers Service to provide information, advice and guidance about careers and learning covering further and higher education, apprenticeships and other forms of training to 16 to 17-year olds (HM Government, 2011, p.36).

*Building Engagement, Building Futures* draws on aspects of Professor Alison Wolf's review of vocational education (Wolf, 2011) which advocated a new 16-19 programme of study to transform the curriculum offered to young people, including meaningful work-experience and a focus on English and mathematics.

Also of interest is the Pupil Premium paid to schools to help those pupils receiving free school meals to achieve more qualifications. Pupils are eligible for this extra funding if they have been in receipt of free school meals at any time in the previous six years. The amount was initially set at £600 per year, per pupil. Schools are accountable for the difference this money makes to pupils, rather than simply accounting for how it is spent (DfE, 2010, p.12). This amount has increased year on year, indicating that successive governments have believed that it mitigates disadvantage (DfE, 2014b). In 2018 the amount of Pupil Premium is £1320 in primary schools and £935 in secondary schools (DfEE/SFA, 2018).

From 2010 to 2012 the Young Person's Guarantee offered a guaranteed job, training, or work experience to 18 to 24-year-olds who had been in receipt of Jobseekers' Allowance for six months. Over the period of the study, the rules for leaving formal

education changed. Until 2015 compulsory education ended in the academic year in which a young person reached the age of 16. After 2015 the rules changed. From that date a pupil could leave school on the last Friday in June if they were 16 by the end of the school holidays and do one of the following until they were aged 17 (pre-2017) or 18 (post-2017): stay in full-time education; start an apprenticeship or traineeship; or spend 20 hours or more working or volunteering whilst in part-time education or training. The 16-19 Bursary Fund was introduced in 2011 to provide support for young vulnerable 16 to 18-year-olds to continue in education, replacing the Education Maintenance Allowance, which was abolished in England in 2011 (DfE, 2011a).

There have been numerous policies introduced since the data-gathering phase of this research ended in 2014, indicating successive governments' continuing concern about young people and their futures. The 16-19 Bursary Fund was a move to a more targeted approach to help the most disadvantaged young people continue their education until they were 18 (Powell, 2017). Alongside this, funds were made available to FE colleges to fund free Level 3 and some Level 2 qualifications to young people. Apprenticeships are reported to be an excellent means to boost the economy and there were 900,000 government-funded apprenticeships in the academic year 2015/2016. A total of 509,400 apprentices started in 2015/2016; others were continuing from previous years (Foster & Powell, 2017) and a target of 3 million new apprentices in England is set for 2020 (Powell 2018). Good information and guidance was first mooted as a way forward following the SEU reports in 1999 and two new schemes uphold this principle. A careers and enterprise company was created by the DfE in late 2014 to provide employer-led advice to school pupils, and a mentoring scheme and work coaches based in Job Centre Plus were introduced to help young people, including finding work experience placements. However, despite these outside agencies giving advice, it is schools who have become accountable through destination statistics for the work status of their pupils. Other far-reaching changes in schools and colleges may be implemented following the Government's acceptance of the *Post-16 Skills Plan* (Sainsbury, 2016), although government plans are somewhat stalled by their own budget restrictions, as stated by Skills Minister, Nick Boles (2016), who said "government accepts and will implement every one of Lord Sainsbury's recommendations on technical education reform 'unequivocally



where possible within current budget constraints’.” There is also an obligation placed on young people who have been on Universal Credit for six months or more to take up an apprenticeship place, a work-based skill course or work placement opportunity (Powell, 2017).

These developments are focused on individual young people taking steps to improve their chances of finding work or training. The only policies aimed at employers are: National Insurance contributions have been abolished for employees aged under 21; and there are incentives to employers to engage apprentices (Powell, 2017). This emphasis on the economic value of individuals and education is discussed next.

### The economic rationalist perspective in NEET policy

Since 1999, the argument that has carried most weight within policy debates about NEETs and youth employment is the economic rationalist argument. NEET status has a negative financial impact, not only on those young people defined as NEET, but also on the economy as a whole. Many government reports have been commissioned on this basis, to explore the issues of youth unemployment and to propose solutions for reducing the numbers of young people who are NEET (McCrone & Bamford, 2016; DCSF, 2008a; Allen, 2014).

The cost of NEETness and youth unemployment has been described and estimated in financial terms of cost to the economy and the cost to the individual in terms of economic and social well-being. For example, the lifetime costs of NEETs to the economy is estimated as between £12 billion and £32 billion (Coles et al., 2010).

The financial cost to the economy of youth unemployment is often described as containing two elements: “public finance costs” and “resource costs” (Godfrey, Hutton, Bradshaw, Cole, Craig & Johnson, 2002, p.4). Public finance costs arise from estimates of the loss of tax revenue and benefits, together with welfare and criminal justice expenditure and health costs. Resource costs also estimate welfare costs, the loss to the economy in terms of productivity lost, in addition to the impact in terms of the resources or opportunity cost to the rest of society (Godfrey et al., 2002, p.5). These resource costs include costs of underemployment and unemployment, by estimating the impact this has on the individual and the family,

and productivity loss, whereas in public finance terms the cost of unemployment is a calculation of benefits paid and tax contributions lost.

Coles argues that these distinctions highlight the need for transparency when costs are published and quoted (Coles et al., 2010, pp.13-14). Taking this caution into account, as now discussed, a number of studies have researched the cost of NEETs (e.g., McNally & Telhaj, 2010; Gregg & Tominey, 2005).

McNally and Telhaj (2010, p.3) state that unemployment of young people (16-24 year olds) is 20 percent higher than other age groups and that the cost to the Exchequer is estimated conservatively at £44 million a week. This is based on the payments such as Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) made by the State to young people and an estimate for the loss of productivity. This 'cost' rises to an upper estimation of £155 million per week if the loss of productivity attributed to those unemployed is based on the average earnings of young people in work who pay tax and National Insurance and have spending power. In addition to this, the link between unemployed youths committing crime and being imprisoned is estimated to cost the State £23 million a week (McNally & Telhaj, 2010, p.4). In 2013, youth unemployment in the UK was 21 percent while the overall unemployment figure in the UK was 7.7 percent. In 2018 youth unemployment was 12.2 percent and adult unemployment was 4.7 percent (Trading Economics, 2018).

Gregg and Tominey (2005) used the National Child Development Survey to examine the effect of youth unemployment on future lifetime wages. Gregg and Tominey (2005) found that even after carefully applying controls for family and individual characteristics, education and region, a causal link between youth unemployment and lower earnings was apparent twenty years after the period of unemployment. If only one episode of youth unemployment were recorded, the effect on wage return over a lifetime was reported as 9–11 percent. If there had been further episodes of unemployment there was a reported 13-21 percentage points effect on earnings. This is referred to as the 'scarring' effect of unemployment (Gregg & Tominey, 2005, p.497).

These studies typify the emphasis placed on the economics of NEETness: they emphasise the loss to the State and the individual in monetary terms. The NEET

issue and youth unemployment could be described as a modern example of the connection between personal troubles and public issues described by Mills:

When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual.

(Mills, 1959, p.9)

This emphasis on the loss to the State and the individual in monetary terms can be useful; supporting attempts to secure funding to mitigate the worst outcomes of unemployment by drawing attention to the number of children living in poverty. Estimating the cost of youth unemployment may be useful because it raises the profile of youth unemployment. However, it may also narrow the focus solely onto upskilling young people rather than looking at the overall economic problems and cultural conditions which may exacerbate youth unemployment. In this way it does not acknowledge the interplay between economic conditions and individuals in that people can only prosper within the right environment and opportunities afforded to them. I further explore this by drawing on the work of Stewart (2004), Simmons and Thompson (2011) and Byrne (2005) on the ways in which economic labour trends and policy affect youth unemployment.

### How economic labour trends and policy affect youth unemployment

Stewart (2004) states that in 1993 69 million young people were unemployed worldwide and in 2003 this figure was 88 million. Young people now account for 50 percent of the world's unemployed, even though they make up only 18 percent of the population. Simmons and Thompson (2011) argue that this could be explained by: the substantial difference between the kind of jobs that have been lost and those that have been created, e.g., heavy industry jobs have been lost and service jobs created; employment relationships in the growing service sector; work is often temporary, part-time and casual, low paid, insecure, and membership of trade unions is low; a larger labour force, e.g., more women with children are employed and older people

are working beyond retirement age; and a substantial increase in immigration into the UK (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.53).

Byrne (2005) argues that a surplus of labour allows employers to increase production with only small increases in labour costs; it also allows employers to threaten employees with replacement if costs rise or compliance falls. These practices are especially effective in post-industrial capitalism where low skill service labour is largely easy to replace (Byrne, 2005, p.42). Byrne outlines three categories of work group emerging in the UK. At the bottom, there is a group whose employment history is punctuated by “worklessness, low waged, unrewarding and insecure employments”, and various training and retraining courses (Byrne 2005, pp.106–107). In the middle, there is a class of workers who are more qualified and employed on reasonable terms, albeit poorly paid in contrast to similar workers in the past. Lastly, Byrne identifies a small group (10 percent) experiencing an enhanced position, some of whom may have reached this position from upward social mobility, but in the main the members of this group have inherited privilege. Byrne concludes, the elite have gained most from the labour market changes that have emerged in post-industrial capitalism (Byrne, 2005, p.108).

Stewart (2004) and Bynner (2012) agree that these changes in the nature of industry and employment in the UK mean that it is no longer possible to identify or define a coherent youth labour market. The growing insecurities of the youth labour market have meant that young people’s routes into work have become much more multifaceted, including a loss in traditional work networks based on family connections, especially in industries like mining (Stewart, 2004; Bynner, 2012, p.40).

Schoon (2004) states that an unprecedented rise in youth unemployment has resulted from these changes in labour and young people today experience more uncertainty as regards their transition from youth to adulthood. This is not evenly felt as research has also revealed that higher achievers face less difficulty and more certainty than their peers in lower social economic positions (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Furlong & Cartmel, 2003). Working-class young people and their families can also find the choices available confusing (Yates, Harris, Sabates & Staff, 2010). Life chances may

be determined by social class, and class inequalities are more evident and strengthened in times of economic crisis. As Simmonds and Thompson state:

for young people from working class backgrounds who are low achievers, the routes open to them are mainly low status training schemes and casual part-time, low-grade work or unemployment. Often this results in periods of unemployment and NEETness.

(Simmonds & Thompson, 2011, p.175).

The conclusion from this research is that changes in the labour market have made young people's transitions from school to work much more uncertain, protracted, insecure, and unstable than was the case 30 years ago (Stewart, 2004). This is one element of change that has affected young people's transitions from school to adult life; another consideration is the changes in education within a neoliberal economic context. These changes will be explored next.

#### A brief exploration of economic environmental changes

I believe that economic and cultural conditions and personal factors are interrelated and influence personal outcomes therefore the historical changes which evolved into the prevailing economic imperative is explained here in detail.

In the UK from 1945 until 1979 there was a general commitment by the main political parties that government would help to generate employment through forming collaborative relationships with trade unions, employers and governments and thus foster equality. This "post-war settlement" (Taylor-Gooby, 2008, p.3) rested on Keynesian economic policies, which involved partners collaborating in devising and implementing policy. The Welfare State was comprised of an expanded education system, free healthcare and provision of a range of universal benefits. There was a broad acceptance that government should and could have a distinct part to play in fostering greater equality, with significant agreement between Labour and the Conservatives over central policy issues (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.24).

In the late 1970s support for neoliberalism grew within the Conservative Party. Neoliberalism is a deeply contested term (Vanugopal, 2015) but for the purposes of this thesis I am broadly considering it to be a political philosophy that combines

economic growth and social justice concerns, with varying emphasis between these two concerns. The move away from Keynesian economics created new ideas, new political perspectives and new institutional forms. These may be considered to be neoliberal because they both expanded the extent and influence of business capital, and the ‘economisation’ of areas of social and political life through privatisation and a growing call for everything to be run like a business, including education (Clarke, 2008). Since 1979 successive UK governments: Conservative (1979-1997); New Labour (1997-2010); the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010-2015); and Conservative (2015-present); have remained faithful to economic neoliberalism and the value of the efficiency of the free market and its role in the economic growth and stability of the UK. There have been some differences: notably New Labour placed a stronger emphasis on social inclusion (Simmons & Thompson, 2011) but still maintained a broadly neoliberal stance, as demonstrated by this statement in the 1992 Labour Party Manifesto “modern government has a strategic role not to replace the market but to ensure that the market works properly” (Labour Party, 1992, p.11).

Avis (2007) argues that as a result of this broad agreement all recent governments have been committed to this neoliberal ideology and have developed policies for capital to flourish. Therefore, neoliberalism has intensified its hegemony and is apparent in many spheres of society. This is evident in how, in the UK as in many developed countries, over the last 30 years conservative influences have been reconstructing social institutions and practices around economic, rather than social democratic imperatives (Weis, McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2006). Apple (2006, p.5) refers to this as processes of “conservative modernization”. Such modernisation has had a profound effect on education, both in organisational aspects, including funding, and in philosophical debates about what education is for and what counts as knowledge.

These changes are fundamental to the argument that I am pursuing: that the causes of NEETness are complex and are part of a whole series of changes in how governments and society have moved implicitly towards an emphasis on an economic imperative characterising the environment in which young people have to negotiate a path.

In educational policy terms, the prevalence of neoliberalism has resulted in the notion that it is not only necessary for education to accommodate the demands of the economy, but it has also become necessary for educational institutions themselves to adopt neoliberal ideologies of consumer choice, markets and competition (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.57).

This translates to new ideas about what it means to be a teacher and a student/learner. As Ball states, the addition of “targets, accountability, competition and choice, leadership, entrepreneurialism, performance related pay and privatisation formulate new ways of thinking about what we do, what we value, what our purposes are” (Ball, 2008, p.42). As these aspects accumulate, education becomes a commodity rather than a public good (Thrupp & Wilmott, 2003, p.13). This results in a change in the types of relationships within education; relationships become defined as “clients, consumers and competitors, manager/managed, contractor, employees appraiser/inspector/monitor, and they exclude or marginalise previous roles, loyalties and subjectivities. They change what is important and valuable and necessary” (Ball, 2008, p.43).

Alongside these changes in relationships, education and educational institutions have become entrenched in business models, marketability and choice. There has been a rise in the culture of self-interest which shows itself in terms of ‘survivalism’ and promoting and protecting the institution and its members, as opposed to a broader concern for community-based educational issues (Ball, 2008, p.45). As Luke notes, there has been:

a retrograde re-commodification of knowledge, as systems and teachers increasingly turn or return to an industrial model of teaching, with packages, tests, and standardized pedagogic sequences seen as enabling both compliance to new criteria for performativity and simple occupational survival.

(Luke, 2006, p.23)

Apple (2006, p.6) argues that powerful ideologies and dominant groups decide what is “useful knowledge” and the value placed on that knowledge which I contend influence all levels of educational institutions. Similarly, Coffield (2008) agrees with

Hargreaves (2004, p.82) who argues that if lifelong learning is ever to be achieved young people leaving school should, “View themselves as someone able to learn successfully, understand learning and themselves as a learner, leave school with a positive attitude to continued learning.”. Coffield adds a fourth outcome, which he calls “‘critical intelligence’ or, ...the ability to detect bullshit and the moral courage to expose it publicly”. He argues that the “maxim for secondary schools should be: ‘Do the minimum harm’; and less harm would be done if the four outcomes listed above replaced five good GCSEs as the criteria by which secondary schools are currently judged” (Coffield, 2008, p.27).

Pierre Bourdieu sees schooling as a mechanism for preserving the status quo when he states:

it is probably cultural inertia which still makes us see education in terms of the ideology of the school as a liberating force... even when the indications tend to be that it is one of the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern.

(Bourdieu, 1974, p.32).

Weis, et al (2006, p.247) note that neoliberals are critical of current descriptions of knowledge that have no relevance to economic goals and needs. Additionally, neoliberal discourses celebrate the values of individual responsibility over collective responsibility, which has the effect of schools becoming places that add capital value to youth rather than facilitating the social ‘good’ of education (White & Wyn, 2008). The discourse of accountability, marketisation and managerialism (Ranson, 2007) has become so ‘normal’ in school policy, funding and culture that as Marginson (1993) notes, it is part of a ‘common-sense’ approach to governance advocated by major political parties: what Foucault would describe as “normalized master narratives” or “regimes of truth” (Foucault, 1980). In this way neoliberal rhetoric is deafening, whilst other alternative models are unheard (Marginson, 1993). The practices of marketization commodify young people under the guise of preparing them for future employment and uphold the view that “investment in individuals’ education will solve all the structural problems of the economy” (Olssen, Codd & O’Neill, 2004, p.150). It would seem, as Lyotard expresses it, that it has become the job of governments to deliver work-ready young people as an economic return for



the investment in their education and therefore to achieve “the optimization of the global relationship between input and output” (Lyotard, 1984, p.11).

The changes in education are illustrated by the following quotes: half a century ago, in his book *The Long Revolution*, the social commentator Raymond Williams argued for a “public education designed to express and create the values of an educated democracy and a common culture” (Williams, 1961, p.155). In 2010 Ranson commented, “Over the past 20 years the neo-liberal agenda of choice and competition in schools has undermined public education” and that “Education should not depend on power and wealth, but on recognising that extending all the capabilities of all children is the nation’s first public good” (Ranson, 2010, p.158). These comments suggest that the education system in England has been led by market forces and has not evolved, as Williams suggested it should, into a system which created a common culture. While capitalist economies generally create inequalities in education and labour markets, the commercialisation and marketisation of education systems strengthen the advantages experienced by privileged groups to the detriment of those less fortunate (Ball, 2003).

### Changes to education relevant to NEETs

The prevailing policy discourse exhorts the benefits of acquiring education and skills to gain sustainable employment, leading to well-being and prosperity, despite there being little evidence of the economic benefits of many qualifications. As Wolf (2002) states, 50 years ago education was about “values, citizenship, the nature of good society, the intrinsic benefits of learning” (Wolf, 2002, p.xii) and whilst it is widely acknowledged that basic education and an increase in the depth and length of such is undeniably a good thing, and a necessary thing for economic growth, it is less clear if post-compulsory education achieves growth (Wolf, 2002, p.7). Wolf argues strongly that whilst it appears that the return of investment in education for the individual and society correlates with spending on education and wages earned and tax paid, it is far less clear whether the skills acquired were as a result of further education or were gained before leaving compulsory education. Basic literacy and to a greater degree numeracy, do have an impact on employment (Carpentieri, Litster & Frumkin, 2009). What should be at the core of government policy is “providing a high quality general education for the young” (Wolf, 2002, p.159). In all countries a

small but significant number of teenagers reject school; they leave school early with few or no qualifications and are more likely to commit crime and be unemployed. They therefore cause governments grave concern. Wolf argues that these teenagers are behaving quite rationally: if they are falling behind academically, why waste their time in school; they will not have any greater prospects if they stay (Wolf, 2002, p.186). In a situation where some young people are unlikely to prosper, they may reject school, and this can affect their personal attributes. Their behaviour and personal attributes can then affect how they are viewed and dealt with. For example, they come to be seen as “at risk”; they are viewed as a problem, these labels may then affect how they perceive themselves and consequently affect their behaviour (Bernburg, 2009).

The effects of labelling children, young people and adults is well documented (Lemert, 1967; Scheff, 1966; Schur, 1971). These studies are grounded in symbolic interactionism, meaning that they investigate ways in which an individual’s self-concept is influenced by experiences and interactions with others. Negative labels are assigned based on the language used to describe individuals or people’s own stereotypical views (Bernburg, 2009, p.190). Labelling theory within education has focused on educational research regarding setting and ability grouping within classrooms and teachers, schools and society’s “fixed-ability thinking” (Marks, 2013, p.41). These practices have documented a negative effect both through teachers’ and others’ preconceived perceptions attached to the labels of low, middle and high ability and children’s self-concept and self-confidence (Francis, 2017, p.107).

Furthermore, as entry-level jobs become more difficult to obtain without a university degree, for some young people staying in education becomes a “system of warehousing” which gives them hope that the qualifications and attributes that they are struggling to achieve will help them to escape a position on the bottom rung of society (Ainley & Allen, 2010, p.76). Thus, students are “docile bodies” (Foucault, 1977, *passim*) at the mercy of market forces. They are often powerless and struggle to have their voices heard with regard to curriculum and/or pedagogy. This dissatisfaction with official knowledge may result in disruption and or disengagement. This can lead to young people being viewed as a problem, in need of

special remedial attention, of ‘curing’.

Paul Willis’ (1977) study of 12 working-class ‘lads’ offers an alternative view that disengagement and disruption may not be expressions of powerlessness, rather a subculture that rejects school and qualifications. The lads’ rejection of the dominant force of school and its rules, Willis argues, indicates that they know that there is no equality in capitalism and they create their own counter-school culture. School, for them, is a place for having a ‘larf’.

In two comparative ethnographic studies that took place in 1972 and 1991, Sharpe (1994) explored the ambitions and aspirations of young working-class girls who were 15 years old and went to school in London. These studies did not reveal a rejection of education, instead they reveal gender-based stereotypical views on jobs, careers and a girl’s position in society. Despite the economic and cultural changes that transpired in the 20 years separating the studies, the sex discrimination laws and a woman Prime Minister, the two different sets of girls expressed remarkably similar aspirations. Whilst they no longer wanted to work in offices, they did want to work in banking. There was an increase in the ambition to ‘work with children’ and many wanted to work to help or care for people. Very few strayed from stereotypical female roles in either set of girls. Girls in both sets were reluctant to be defined as feminists. In 1991, the girls did express the intention of getting married, or cohabitating and having children but also expected more help from their husbands than in 1972. Willis’ (1977) study and Sharpe’s (1994) study are important to my research; they use the voice of the young people to explore their lives, ambitions, aspirations and their engagement with school. They do so by situating their studies within the environmental structures of the time, and issues of social mobility, equality and opportunities for all are a strong feature. In the intervening years, further studies have shed light on young people’s ambitions, aspirations and engagement with school (e.g., Croxford & Raffe, 2000; Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; McKendrick, Scott & Sinclair, 2007; Stahl, 2012).

In 2011, Simmons and Thompson argued that the UK Coalition government’s policy and push for free schools and academies linked marketisation and the private delivery of education with notions of opportunity, social mobility and fairness. This

has continued with subsequent governments. Underlying this is the view that individuals are responsible for their own success or failure; it overlooks the fact that resources are limited. Emphasis is placed on upgrading the aspirations and the dispositions of young people to take advantage of opportunities (Simmons & Thompson, 2011, p.78) rather than reforming the economic and social contexts in which they must navigate their transition to adult life. This focus on young people's aspirations will be discussed next.

### Aspirations

Young people's aspirations are debated in educational settings and within policy and political discussions. Young people are frequently seen as representing the future of a society and they are also criticised for not taking advantage of the opportunities afforded them: their aspirations are too low, or their expectations are insufficiently grounded (Berrington, Roberts & Tammes, 2016). In 2005, UK government policies focused on increasing aspirations as evidenced by these White Papers: Higher Standards, Better Schools for All (DfES, 2005a); 14-19 Education and Skills (DfES, 2005b); and Youth Matters (DfES, 2005c). When the Coalition government was in power the focus turned to raising aspirations in the belief that this would lead to better educational outcomes, improve social mobility and thus lead to less poverty.

The statistics gathered by the LSYPE were analysed and indicated a statistical link to educational achievement and aspirations. These results were published in DCSF, (2008a, 2008b, 2008c) papers and thus the link between low aspirations and attainment became somewhat prominent.

There is evidence, however, that young people do not lack aspirations (Berrington, et al., 2016) and much research has been conducted regarding how young people see their futures (MacDonald, 2011; Mendick, Allen & Harvey 2015, Thomson & Holland 2002). Despite this research, a lack of aspirations is often cited both as the cause of youth unemployment and of low social mobility. There are also many links made to educational achievement and aspirations. However, as explained previously, this can lead to a view that young people's aspirations are personal but, as St. Clair and Benjamin (2011, p.506) argue, it is important to explore contextual factors and personal factors as there is "deep tension between structural and agentic aspects". I would argue that there is a need to examine the interaction between the perceived

lack of aspiration as an individual failure and the social economic situation in which that individual resides. As ethnographic research by Stahl (2012) that studied 23 working-class boys from South London concludes, working-class boys do have aspirations but these are mediated by their opportunities, experiences within school and an education system situated in a broader neoliberalist structure.

There has been substantial interest in aspirations of young people and the link to poverty, attainment and disengagement. The Rowntree Foundation carried out three studies to investigate the connection between aspirations, attitudes and behaviour and educational outcomes (Carter-Wall & Whitfield, 2012; Goodman & Gregg, eds 2010; Kintrea, St. Clair & Houston, 2011).

Based on the evidence available, a direct connection between aspirations, attitudes and behaviour and educational outcomes was not found. They noted that interventions had been adopted to attempt to close the educational achievement gap between poor and more affluent children. However, these had been poorly evaluated and based on assumptions of low aspirations held by parents and children. The interventions which had showed promise were those that concentrated on parental involvement in their children's education. There was inconclusive evidence regarding the effect of interventions that concentrated on mentoring, children's motivation and after school activities.

Kintrea et al. (2011) also challenged the widespread assumption that children from deprived backgrounds have low aspirations. They found that these children did have high aspirations but sometimes did not know how to reach their goals and furthermore local labour markets did not always offer enough opportunities.

Evidence from the UKHLS survey concluded that out of 4899 10 to 15-year-olds, two-thirds indicated that they would like to go to university. Croll (2009) also found that the aspiration to attend university increased with age, contrary to much political rhetoric. Evidence indicates that in deprived areas aspirations are high and not having a job was not an acceptable option (Kintrea et al., 2011; Ipsos MORI, 2011; Goodman & Gregg, 2010; St. Clair & Benjamin, 2011). However, whilst many young people aspire to go to university and to professional and managerial jobs, jobs

in these numbers are not supported by the labour market (Atherton, Cymbir, Roberts, Page & Remedios, 2009).

Qualitative evidence from a survey of 488 Year 7 and Year 9 pupils and 16 in-depth interviews with young people aged 8 to 11 conducted by Ipsos MORI (2011) for Inspire-Aspire South Yorkshire concluded that there were young people who had strong positive educational and employment aspirations. 94 per cent agreed that it is important to get good GCSEs, 90 per cent agreed that it was important to set goals and to have ambitions. St. Clair, Kintrea and Houston (2013) conclude that the idea that there is a culture of low aspirations among young people needs to be questioned.

Aspirations, the lack of them or how they are formed, are often addressed by the use of four different models that have evolved to explain, explore and challenge how educational aspirations are developed in young people. The first model is the status model, based on parental involvement and home life. The second model is the blocked opportunities model which asks the question are the opportunities available to make the aspirations realistic? The third model is the social cognitive model, where self-efficacy and agency alongside the environment interact; and the last model is the social support model, where the role of significant other(s) influences aspirations (St. Clair et al., 2013). All the models feature two sets of factors: structural and psychosocial; it is this connection that I will consider next. To explore this further I will discuss the role of social justice in relation to NEETs.

Is NEET a social justice issue?

A discussion regarding social justice seems appropriate because only within a culture of fair choice and opportunities can society in general and the participants of this research flourish. In this section I will discuss some aspects of social justice theory and how these relate to the practice of social justice. This is a complex issue as a definition of what constitutes social justice is elusive.

The principles of social justice refer to ideas of a just society, where 'justice' is more than just the law. It is the idea that a society will treat everybody fairly and everybody will share in the benefits of that society (Smith, 2012, p.xi). The political philosopher Rawls argues that justice is achievable through these principles:

Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for all. Social and economic equalities are to be arranged so that they are both: (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged; and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

(Rawls, 1971, p.302)

However, these principles are still open to interpretation. Firstly, are all inequalities unjust? What is equality? Where do individual responsibility and social justice intersect? Answers to these questions vary widely and it can be argued that everyone wishes to live in a just society, however, what is perceived as a just society differs widely and people with different political beliefs have different ideas of what a just society would look like. Social justice is, according to the Coalition government of 2010-2015, “about making society function better – providing the support and tools to help turn lives around” (DWP, 2012). This functionalist view contrasts with the former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown’s broader statement: “our mission for liberty for all and fairness to all summons us to develop all of the potential of all of the people” (Brown, 2005).

There are also different interpretations of what is fair and what constitutes a just share. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) argue that the eradication of relative poverty by redistributing wealth, normally through taxation, would lead to a more equal society. On the other hand, followers of Thatcherism take the view that the freedom of the individual to choose, to take opportunities and to gain a fair reward for doing so is just and fair (Smith, 2012, p.27). Platt (2011) goes further by advocating inequality as necessary for a market-led economy to prosper. Social justice can be interpreted as ‘equality of opportunity’. From this viewpoint, a government’s task is to ensure equal opportunities for its citizens, however, it is up to the individuals to use these opportunities or neglect them; it is seen as an individual choice and not for the government to interfere. This concept of equality of opportunity is summarised by Lynch (1995, p.11) as follows: “Unequal results are justified if everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed”. However, she argues that in order for equality of opportunity to exist, there has to be equality of access, participation and rights. Therefore, a more radical take on redistributive social justice would advocate

equality of outcome, which seeks to intervene and adjust conditions to enable different groups to succeed equally. Both of these liberal conceptions of social justice are limited, however, to the extent that they do not confront what Lynch (1995, p.24) refers to as “the fundamental problems of hierarchies of power, wealth and other privileges”:

The fact remains that in a highly unequal society, someone has to occupy the subordinate positions even if the identity of those occupying them may change from white to black, from citizens to migrant workers.

(Lynch, 1995, pp.12-14)

In response to the limitations of liberal conceptualizations of equality Lynch proposes a further ‘quality objective’ which she refers to as “equality of condition”, which:

would involve the development of an egalitarian society which would be committed to equality in the living conditions of all members of society [...] It would mean having substantial equality in working conditions, job satisfaction and income across different occupations; an educational system devoted to developing equally the potentials of every member of society; [...] a restructuring of family and personal life for the sake of enriching the personal relationships of every individual.

(Lynch, 1995, pp.24-25)

This is a definition of social justice which I believe seeks far more than redistribution and requires far more radical thought and action. It offers a more radical viewpoint on how to address the ‘problem’ of NEETness and youth unemployment. Arguably, theories of social justice would not be necessary if social injustice were not apparent. NEETness is a complex issue in which reporting on how many NEETs exist and discussions about the economic cost of NEETness have become the strongest and loudest discourses; issues of social justice have been less prominent. This is the case even though, as indicated by the Government’s own figures, a 16-year-old is more than twice as likely to be NEET if in receipt of free school meals at 15. For those young people whose parents have professional occupations, only two percent will be NEET at age 16. For those young people with parents in routine occupations this rises to 13 percent (DfE/ONS, 2010). These statistics and those relating to cost of



NEETness, as illustrated in the previous sections, can and are used within social justice debates as they show the economic effect of becoming NEET, and the characteristics of those who are NEET. Statistics are often used to good effect when justifying the benefits of a costly intervention programme. This is further illustration of how complex the NEET issue is and how complex it is to negotiate a pathway that helps the individual, whilst recognising social injustice and economic reality.

### Individualisation and its relevance to young people

As has been discussed, there have been fundamental changes to the pathways for young people over recent years. Once, their life chances and stories were mostly predictable, and based on class and communities. Whilst this may have changed and for some young people the change has been positive and has resulted in some barriers being lifted, these changes should not be considered to constitute emancipation or equality as structured inequalities persist and, in some respects, have intensified (Bynner, 2005). However, as discussed next, these inequalities are seen and dealt with by governments as individual circumstances and not as a collective situation. Young people no longer have a pre-conceived sense of identity and community support and therefore must shape their own futures (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

The theories of individualisation advanced by Beck and Beck Gernsheim (2002) and Zygmunt Bauman (2001) agree that people are increasingly encouraged to, and therefore do, understand their activities and their destinies as the outcome of their own, free, specific choices rather than social structural forces. For Bauman, individualisation is a disturbing effect of the hegemonic grip of neo-liberalism (individualism and consumerism) on political and media discourse. For Beck, individualism is a result of ever-increasing confusion in Welfare State policies and employment insecurity (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

This individualism is illustrated by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's observations of how people relay their life stories:

people no longer, as they apparently once did in the past, talk of 'blows of fate', 'objective conditions' and 'outside forces' that have 'overwhelmed', 'predetermined' or 'compelled' them throughout their lives. Instead their

narratives tell of ‘decisions, non-decisions, capacities [and] achievements’ in an ‘individualistic and active’ form in which they ‘perceive themselves as at least partly shaping themselves and the conditions of their lives, even or above all in the language of failure.

(Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.25)

For Beck, individualism is so prominent within these stories, class with its cultural traditions and economic constraints has disappeared. Bauman also states that in this individualised society, life story narratives are often biased towards this distortion of current social reality:

In our ‘society of individuals’ all the messes into which one can get are assumed to be self-made and all the hot water into which one can fall is proclaimed to have been boiled by the hapless failures who have fallen into it. For the good and bad that fill one’s life a person has only himself or herself to thank or to blame. And the way the ‘whole life story’ is told raises this assumption to the rank of an axiom.

(Bauman, 2001, p.9)

Thus, personal responsibility is at the forefront. What is lost is the connection between individual lives and actions and society and how society conducts itself (Bauman, 2001, p.9). Furlong and Cartmel (1997, p.4) describe this as the “epistemological fallacy” of late modernity; they argue that “People’s life chances remain highly structured at the same time as they increasingly seek solutions on an individual rather than a collective basis”. Increasingly, class differences are ignored or seen as irrelevant, because of the variation of individuals’ lived experiences. Young people are encouraged to find answers for their futures through routes of education and labour and to find answers to their problems encountered along the way *as individuals*. Young people are not encouraged to consider their situation as a collective problem or that there may be a collective solution, even though evidence exists that shows outcomes (measures of ‘success’) are strongly related to social class and gender (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997).

For Beck and Bauman, individualisation implies that people are unaware (or perhaps unconcerned) with the social construction and inequalities that remain in society

through lack of resources and structurally/culturally manufactured social injustice. However, Furlong and Cartmel (1997) maintains that, whilst traditional class descriptions and therefore their relevance to current debates may have waned in people's consciousness, what still remains is the knowledge that inequalities do exist through class divisions and this is evident to them through their limited life choices and futures. There is evidence of this in a review of research by Gillborn and Mirza (2000): in terms of educational achievements, the class gap is larger but is less evident in policy, than in either race or gender performances. Ball (2008) argues that social exclusion has replaced class in the language of education policy and whatever gains may have been made in terms of race and gender, class still remains an indicator of social inequality (Ball, 2008, p.173).

Byrne also maintains that, due to 30 years of neoliberalism in the UK, we now live in a society that is less equal, more divided and less socially mobile. This, he argues, "is a direct result of fiscal policies that favour the rich, for example, inheritance tax, but also more importantly these changes have resulted from the concept of individualism" (Byrne, 2005, p.95).

I contend that governments have chosen to concentrate on supply-side issues, e.g., introducing more qualifications, the Youth Contract and raising the school leaving age. In addition, welfare benefits controls have been introduced which may create a more accommodating workforce which is ready to work part-time, in temporary and insecure employment. There is a social justice element to this debate implicit in Byrne's three categories of workers. In the ideological cultural shift from collectiveness to individualisation this has been largely marginalised, and when recognised, has been framed in an economic and individual deficit perspective.

Other surveys and research looking at specific areas of young people's lives may help to reveal more about their individual behaviour and circumstances. I have chosen four studies to illustrate this point.

### Individuals' lives in context

In the following section I explore studies that examine individual activities within structural contexts. These studies investigate the role of and the culture promoted by

schools and educational authorities, and their effects on how individuals behave within the situated environment that they reside in. These studies have been chosen as representative of how qualitative research can enhance our understanding of statistics routinely gathered and disseminated. In the years that followed these studies, academisation of schools meant that statistics were not routinely gathered for these schools as are outside of local authority control. Thus, the impact of the findings of these findings may be less relevant in today's educational landscape.

Firstly, I look at a study by Pollard and Flier (2007) which offers some insight into how a young person's home and family life contribute to their experience at school. Pollard and Flier's longitudinal study explored issues of identity and cultural influences on education. It focused on 16 children who attended two primary schools, one in an affluent suburban area where parental occupations were mostly professional and another school in a working-class area where parents were mostly semi-skilled. When the children were 11 they attended nine different secondary schools including comprehensive schools, grammar schools, church schools and independent schools. Over the 12 years of the study the parents and the children were interviewed, observed and photographed. The parents kept diaries and the pupils made notes. Schools' documentation was also used as appropriate, for example, attendance records, behaviour records, etc. (Pollard & Flier, 2007, p. 443).

The study concludes that pupils shape their experiences and perceptions of what it means to be a pupil by the mediation and interpretation of wider political discourse, through their friends, families and teachers and their relationships with these key people and the relationships between these people (Pollard & Flier, 2007, p.444). The authors suggest that the "... findings demonstrated that learner engagement within secondary school contexts is increasingly embedded within wider spheres of social activity and identity formation as pupils move through their adolescent years" (Pollard & Flier, 2007, p.447). Those young people with inconsistent identities may come into conflict with the school ethos, they may also be labelled 'disaffected' a term which, as discussed next, is not without contention.

The label of disaffection is often used to describe young people who find engagement with school challenging. McKendrick et al., (2007) state that

disaffection is often cited as a cause of anti-social behaviour, non-engagement in education and teenage pregnancies. Disaffection is often used to describe behaviours and attitudes and is applied to young people to indicate a rejection of the values and cultures of dominant institutions (Ferguson, 2004, p.292).

McKendrick et al. use the Drumchapel Aspirations and Skills Study, carried out in Drumchapel, which is ranked as one of the five most deprived areas in Scotland (McKendrick et al., 2007, p.142), to find out if this rejection of values was present. Disaffection was defined as i) disengagement, non-attendance at school, lack of application to study and social participation; and ii) negative attitudes to school and the acquisition of skills and employment. The information relating to the attendance and application to study was gathered from Head Teachers. Then 307 pupils were asked to complete a questionnaire which included questions regarding their involvement in clubs and activities, as well as questions relating to their employment ambitions, aspirations and expectations. The most compelling finding from this survey was that young people were engaged in their community and education and were optimistic and ambitious about their future and that this was not narrowed by their current circumstances. There was no evidence that the pupils of Drumchapel rejected the work ethic or the value of education (McKendrick et al., 2007, p.155). This conclusion concurs with other studies that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds displayed highly conventional attitudes (e.g., McDonald & Marsh, 2005). However, McKendrick et al. (2007) noted that respondents who were low skilled and less likely to take up further training echoed the dissatisfaction with educational provision commented upon by young British people within an international survey discussed by Bynner (2001). This evidence of dissatisfaction among young people in education and school is often described as disaffection. The following section explores studies which appear to label young people who have negative views on school, teachers and the curriculum as disaffected rather than perhaps the more accurate term 'dissatisfied'.

An Ipsos MORI poll conducted in 2004 in England on behalf of the Sutton Trust found that out of the 2303 pupils who completed the questionnaire, 22 percent of them did not like school 'most of the time or all the time' and half of those who answered this way stated that they would like lessons to be more interesting; 20

percent would have liked lessons to be more practical and 40 percent wanted more choice of subjects to study (Ipsos MORI, 2004). Keys and Fernandes (1993) and Keys, Harris, and Fernandes (1995) found that 10 percent of these disaffected children seemed to have negative attitudes to school and school work, and that within this group they found lessons boring and they did not like their teachers. They also did not believe that school would teach them useful things for their futures.

This ‘disaffection’, Keys argues, could in turn lead to absenteeism, as amongst the reasons stated by those truanting was “boredom” and “not enough practical application within lessons” (Keys, 2006, p.27). This highlights the connections between the school rules, curriculum, what is valued (environment), the young people’s behavioural response and then the school’s response to that behaviour. McKendrick et al. (2007, p.147) argue that a link can be made between disaffection with non-participation in education, truancy and non-attendance. This results in policies being aimed at young people who are NEET when they become a problem for society (by taking part in anti-social behaviour and/or accruing costs to the government) rather than policies to prevent young people becoming NEET. I would add that if dissatisfaction, rather than the evocative term disaffection were used more to describe these young people’s views on school, teachers and the curriculum, this could give a greater voice to young people and their own concerns for their future.

I have selected two research studies, namely Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson and Kirk (2003) and Broadhurst, Paton and May-Chahal (2005), as particularly useful to examine factors that influence truancy and non-attendance, two things which are often cited as characteristic of those who become NEET (DCSF/ONS, 2008, 2009; DfE/ONS, 2010, 2011).

A study on attendance, *Absence From School: A study of its causes and effects*, was carried out by Malcolm et al. (2003) in seven Local Authorities in England. The dataset comprised interviews with 143 education professionals, five police service operatives and 528 secondary school pupils. Questionnaires were also completed by 662 primary school pupils and 373 parents in 13 primary schools and 14 secondary schools.

Local Authorities and parents both concluded that good attendance was crucial to attainment, and poor attendance was associated with disruptive behaviour. Pupils cited school-related issues as reasons for non-attendance, for example, 27 percent of the 662 primary and 16 percent of the secondary school pupils reported that they had truanted. Truancy was defined as absences which pupils themselves indicated would be unacceptable to teachers (Malcolm et al., 2003, p.15). The key reasons for truancy were: bullying; boredom; dislike of teachers; fear of tests; peer pressure; frustration at the size of the school; and school rules. Parents, in the main, agreed with these school-related issues as being the cause of poor attendance. Very few parents or pupils gave reasons related to home issues (such as parental break-up) and even fewer cited personal traits of the pupils such as laziness. Conversely, Local Authorities and teachers cited home factors as the main cause of truancy (e.g., low valuing of education, disorganised lifestyles and inadequate parenting). Local Authorities' representatives and secondary school teachers did mention inappropriate curriculum, teaching, school attitudes, racial harassment, bullying and peer pressure; they also cited personal things like poor self-esteem and perceived inadequacies (Malcolm et al., 2003, p.viii).

I would suggest that the conclusions from the study by Malcolm et al. (2003) highlight the complexity of the relationship between parents' and pupils' individual perceptions and the structural forces within the school environment. However, to my knowledge, most solutions to low attendance or truancy at school level focus on the individual pupil's behaviour and do not make a connection to the school environment or educational policies in general<sup>6</sup>, or the contribution of these to pupils 'failing' at school or making sensible decisions to opt out (Wolf, 2011). This emphasis on the individual as the locus of the 'problem' also features in the Europe-wide Reducing Early School Leaving (RESL) project (RESL, 2013-2018).

There are also families for whom school attendance can be low on their agenda as their lives are fraught with other considerations. Broadhurst et al. (2005) carried out a study of 36 families, interviewing 31 mothers, three fathers, two carers, 13 boys and 11 girls of school age. The children were not attending any school and were

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<sup>6</sup> This disconnect warrants further research, especially in the light of academisation, free schools and austerity measures introduced since 2010.

absent from school rolls. The research endeavoured to establish the factors that precipitated this off-roll status. Of the 36 families interviewed, three groups emerge, as follows. Four families located the problem of non-attendance at school as a problem of suitability, e.g., they felt that the Local Authority had not catered for a child's specific needs or the children were 15 and the Local Authority had advised the parents to apply for a post-16 place at a school or college, as it was too late for a child to join Year 11 and succeed in examinations. The parents made little reference to other personal problems and the families were engaged with the neighbourhood, the community and employment. These families and their children were only temporarily not engaged with formal education and when issues were resolved, or the child reached 16, it was likely the children would be enrolled in a school or college.

The largest group, 18 families, told stories of disadvantage, with periods of poverty, homelessness, troubled family relationships and mental health problems. Some were fleeing domestic violence and securing housing and some stability was their priority. This group seemed to be temporarily disengaged and recounted previous better times and good attendance at primary level schooling. Children and parents temporarily were less resilient as they tried to "recreate networks of support following periods of great adversity" (Broadhurst et al., 2005, p.113). They had suffered some loss in terms of relationships, friends or familiar local areas. The children interviewed expressed sadness and issues were ongoing and "prevented the participation in the routine and order of school" (Broadhurst et al., 2005, p.114).

A group accounting for 14 families was characterised by repeated negative life events. They lived lives completely disengaged from the outside world. They lived their lives indoors, away from the negativity of relationships beyond the home including with school. They had experienced "multiple and enduring difficulties", repeated homelessness, abuse, chronic poverty and ill health. For these families a withdrawal to "behind closed doors" was preferable to risking further negative consequences of contact outside the home, including that with school. For them, there were too many difficulties to face and they experienced a strong sense of defeat. Children in this group adopted alternative and sometimes criminal lifestyles (Broadhurst et al., 2005, p.117).



This study and these families show the difficulty in separating the situated cultural environment of children, their individual behaviour, experiences and their future prospects. The large study discussed next arrived at similar conclusions.

### Reducing Early School Leaving (RESL)

This European-wide project Reducing Early School Leaving (RESL), which took place from February 2013 to January 2018, aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the complex and often subtle interplay of factors on a macro, meso and micro level predict early school leaving?
2. What intervention or compensation measures can be identified as successful in keeping ‘a pupil at risk of ESL’ in school or in guiding him/her to an alternative learning arena and what specific approaches or concurrences of variables explains this success?

(RESL, 2013-2018)

This research is concerned primarily with the choices and opportunities available to young people at risk of early school leaving. The study reported data from various sources across seven European countries.

In one large UK<sup>7</sup> school the RESL team conducted a survey with teachers, learning mentors and others, which found that they overwhelmingly assigned low individual aspirations, low individual academic ability and family problems as the key factors responsible for young people leaving school early. This concurs with other surveys where family issues and individual motivation, skills and achievements are highlighted, therefore early school leaving and perhaps becoming NEET are considered beyond a school’s influence (Kaye, D’Angelo, Ryan & Lőrinc, 2016). In the UK school in RESL the top three approaches to reducing early school leaving are focused on the individual and mitigating their risk of leaving school early. These are: monitoring attendance; identifying and supporting those at risk of leaving school early; and more parental involvement. Staff believed these would decrease the risk of leaving school early (Kaye et al., 2016).

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<sup>7</sup> RESL publications refer to the UK; they do not differentiate between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The RESL study found that students who had a more positive academic score (calculated from their data) were more likely to exhibit higher levels of engagement at school (Kaye, D'Angelo, Ryan & Lőrinc, 2017). However, the RESL authors concluded that:

the processes leading to Early School Leaving (ESL) and, more generally, poor educational achievements are extremely complex. Even when looking just at the individual and institutional levels, ESL appears to be dependent on the interaction of personal characteristics, family background, self-perceptions and attitudes, and relationships with teachers and peers, in a way where no individual variable is, on its own, enough of a risk or protective factor, but all contribute to determine the overall likelihood of an individual young person leaving secondary education without an upper secondary qualification.

(Kaye et al., 2017, Publication 4, p.42)

In summary, these studies offer some evidence that sheds light on the individual nature of the lives and circumstances of young people that is not confined to large scale statistical studies. These research studies lead to the conclusion that young people lead complex lives, their lives are interconnected within the cultural space in which they live and the circumstances that arise. However, many young people identified as at risk do manage to succeed against the odds. The contributing factors that make this possible are addressed next.

## Resilience

Why is it that, although research identifies certain risk factors which may lead to social exclusion (e.g., Atkinson & Hills, 1998; Bynner 2001; Schoon, 2002) young people's exposure to these risk factors does not always lead to negative outcomes? It has been shown in a number of studies (e.g., Werner, 1989; Pilling, 1990; Rutter, 1990; Masten, Best & Gamezy, 1990; Werner & Smith, 1992; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000) that many people can and do overcome great adversity and adapt positively to the challenges of negative circumstances that *should* impede their success. This positive adaptation to adversity is often referred to as resilience. For a person to be labelled resilient it is necessary for them to outperform what was expected for them, given their circumstances or risk factors. In this way it is not a personality attribute,

rather the result of a process of “positive adaption in the face of significant adversity or trauma” (Schoon & Bynner, 2003, p.21). Schoon and Bynner (2003, p.21) suggest that if such resilience attributes could be examined they could help form new social policies to aid those most at risk. Schoon and Bynner’s study draws on the longitudinal data contained in two datasets; the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS) and the 1970 British Cohort study, both of which followed children from childhood to adulthood. They argue that the adverse effects from social deprivation are:

- stronger if they occur in early childhood (age 7) and/or during adolescence when important career decisions are made;
- cumulative in that long-term socioeconomic adversity has greater effects than occasional adversity;
- not always apparent immediately but may emerge later;
- instrumental, if sustained over a long time, in reducing an individuals’ capacity to learn to adapt successfully.

(Schoon & Bynner, 2003, p.23)

One of Schoon and Bynner’s objectives in this research was to identify protective factors that help young people overcome adverse situations. In this, their results concurred with other studies (Rutter & Madge, 1976; Davey Smith, Hart, Blane, Gillis & Hawthorne, 1997; Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Gregg & Machin, 1997). Schoon and Bynner’s findings were explained within three categories: children’s attributes; family characteristics; and features of the wider social context.

Children’s attributes are described as: having a strong belief in their own ability; having aspirations to continue in education at 16; having an aspiration to have a professional career; and having hobbies. Family characteristics include belonging to a stable family, where parents take an interest and active part in their education by visiting the school and talking to teachers. Other important factors are having a parent who read to their child and doing joint activities as a family. The wider social context which could help is described as having a teacher who recognises a child’s capabilities and as such provides an outside supportive force (Schoon & Bynner,

2003, p.24). These constitute environmental factors which interrelate with behaviour factors and personal factors.

Schoon and Bynner (2003, p.26) conclude that protective factors, however well-established or exercised, cannot build “Positive adaptation, or resilience, *as it* does not reside within the person, but in the active interactions between the young person and aspects of the environment he/she experiences”. They advocate early prevention to interrupt the long-term effects of social deprivation and social adversity, rather than intervention at a later age or stage, which would help young people to develop skills and build resilience.

International research has also been examined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to offer some explanations of how children ‘beat the odds’ when they are economically disadvantaged, to achieve more than expected (OECD, 2011). OECD uses data gathered from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)<sup>8</sup> which measures the knowledge and skills of 400,000 15-year-old students from 57 countries. The OECD report identifies several contributing factors that can result in resilience, defined in this context as good academic performance (specifically in Science) which exceeds the level predicted by a child’s social economic background. The study identifies factors across the countries which make a difference to the achievement of ‘resilient’ children. These include:

- Motivation of the student
- An interest in the subject (science)
- The relevance they thought science had to work or career prospects
- An interest in the science outside of school expressed by watching television programs, reading books, visiting places of interest, belonging to a (science) club
- A student’s confidence in their own ability in science
- If students felt prepared for a career involving science
- If science was a compulsory subject within the school, they attended

(OECD, 2011)

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<sup>8</sup> Variables between countries in terms of social structures (e.g., type of school) examinations and data gathering are explained in OECD (2011).

Although this study concentrated on the Science results of PISA it is still useful as it provides data that shows that students' confidence and experience and the perceived relevance of the subject to their aspirations can help them overcome the supposed inevitability of their circumstances.

This section illustrates why some young people are resilient and achieve more than their circumstances would indicate. Both Schoon and Bynner (2003) and the OECD (2011) studies conclude that resilience is connected to the social structure that surrounds young people. This could be within their home and take the form of a stable family life with high parental expectations or it could be within a wider social context, such as the young person seeing the connection between the subject learnt and everyday life and jobs, careers and future prospects.

Self-attributes of resilient young people also ranked high among the things that could make a difference. These included self-motivation, a belief in their own ability and high aspirations. However, this alone cannot compensate if young people do not have positive interactions within the environment that surrounds them. Schoon and Bynner (2003) also advocate that this positive interaction could be created or helped by preventative measures early in a young person's life to halt the effect of cumulative adversity.

## Summary

The current situation of NEET young people within the UK has to be understood in relation to the context. The causes of unemployment, inclusion and exclusion cannot be explained by a discourse that focusses solely on individualised deficit. The problems faced by these young people may also be influenced by politics and policies actively followed by the State. An example of this is evident in a speech made by the former Work and Pensions Secretary, Iain Duncan Smith MP, who described poverty as the result of "worklessness and welfare dependency, addiction, educational failure, debt or family breakdown" (Duncan Smith, 2014). I would argue that this individualisation of worklessness and dysfunction disregards any other reason why individuals might be workless. I believe there is an interconnection between a shortage of jobs, an unequal education system, poor health, inadequate and expensive public transport, affordable child care and the options and

opportunities afforded to these young people.

However, despite this theoretical discussion, pragmatic solutions are often taken to alleviate the problems of individuals. In the next chapter I show how the emphasis on collecting and analysing statistics of those known to be NEET influenced the practices of identifying those at risk of NEET with a view to providing interventions. This was a live issue when this study commenced in 2008 and subsequently influenced the selection by the school at the centre of this study of the participants in this research.

## Chapter 2 Statistics and Risk of NEET Indicator

### Introduction

In this Chapter I discuss the issue of young people at risk of becoming NEET and then examine the issue of data-gathering on NEETs, highlighting some difficulties with this. I then review data from two longitudinal surveys of young people in England to identify the characteristics of NEETs and the likelihood (risk) of a young person becoming NEET. This is important because these surveys informed the development of the Local Authority's RONI tool, which was developed prior to the start of this study and subsequently used to select the participants in the intervention programme featured in this study. I then outline the piloting of the RONI and explore further the collaborative relationship between myself as the researcher and the school in relationship to the development and use of the RONI in my study. This is an important element in this study as it explains how the Local Authority identified pupils' level of risk of becoming NEET on leaving school.

### At risk

In this section I explore what being 'at risk of becoming NEET' may mean. I critically examine how government statistics and longitudinal studies have been used to determine the probability of becoming NEET and the characteristics of those deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET. I look at the term 'at risk', its origins within the insurance industry and medicine and its increasing association with education and educational outcomes.

Bennett and colleagues describe how risk:

has become a ubiquitous way of dividing populations so that harm may be prevented, reduced or minimized. Certain individuals, families, communities and populations are regarded as at risk or at high risk of such things as long-term unemployment, child abuse, breast cancer or foetal abnormalities.

(Bennett, Grossberg & Morris, 2005, p.312)

The term 'at risk' is strongly associated with the insurance industry which, through mathematical calculations, takes into account liabilities and then produces an

estimate of risk which is used to determine premiums. Risk estimation is also used in medical science, e.g., the risk associated with vaccinations for controlling childhood illnesses such as measles is calculated as small, compared to the risk associated with exposure to the diseases (BBC, 2001).

The presence of risk, in any context, is usually calculated by estimating the correlation between an event and the consequential increased probability of a negative outcome. For example, in medicine, the patient is often treated to reduce the risk and mitigate the social, emotional and economic effects of not treating the patient (Richardson, 1989, p.8). Pallas (1989, p.22) states that the term ‘at risk’, when used to describe students, can convey the same sense of urgency, the same sense of probability and preventability present in medicine, and therefore a sense that “untreated education problems can be as serious as untreated medical problems”.

This analogy between medical risk and educational risk can also position individuals as to blame for their circumstances. For example, in medicine, if the reasons for ill-health can be blamed on individual choices, this focuses attention on the behaviour of the individual, rather than on wider social issues (Lupton, 1993, p.433). The same conclusion could be reached in education in that, if the risk is located in the personal characteristics of the student, this may mean the student is regarded as deficient, rather than considering whether systems are deficient or whether they meet the educational needs of the student.

Despite the limitations associated with the term ‘at risk’, it is a term often used in educational policy literature regarding students’ potential outcomes from education. For example, children receiving free school meals are reported as ‘at risk’ of not achieving good GCSE results by government and charitable organisations (DCSF/ONS, 2008, 2009; DfE/ONS, 2010, 2011). An extensive body of research confirms that the academic achievement of students living in persistent poverty is much lower than for their more affluent peers and FSM is effectively used as a proxy for poverty in this case (DCSF/ONS, 2008, 2009; DfE/ONS, 2010, 2011).

The practice of defining children by risk factors links probability to outcome, but some students who have grown up in socio-economically disadvantaged



environments excel both academically and socially (OECD, 2011). Conversely, students who have grown up in affluent, advantaged situations may experience negative outcomes academically, behaviourally and socially. Therefore, an important caution must be taken into account: “predictions from early risk signs are often valid for groups but are much less powerful for individuals within groups” (Keogh, 2000, p.5). Nevertheless, risk factors have been used extensively by Government Departments and Local Authorities in seeking to explain why some groups of students achieve better outcomes than others and in the development of RONIs, including the one used in this study.

### NEET statistics

Statistics are gathered both by national and local government to calculate the percentage of young people who are classified as NEET. These statistics are widely used as a point of reference by researchers (such as Sachdev, Harris & Roberts, 2006; Rennison, Maguire, Middleton & Ashworth, 2005; York Consultancy Ltd., 2005; McNally & Telhaj, 2010) and in government publications such as those of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2004) and the DCSF NEET Strategy (DCSF 2008a; DCSF 2008b). These data have been used as recently as December 2017 in research briefing papers for the House of Commons (Powell, 2017) and as such they are the most current data available. Such statistics are often presented by government and researchers in two ways: raw data are used to represent the percentage of young people who are NEET (locally, regionally and nationally); and also the statistics are examined to reveal the characteristics of NEETs and attempt to predict from probability scores which groups of young people are at risk of becoming NEET. Arguably, the first type of statistics drove the interest of the Local Authority in this study to sponsor this collaborative research and the second set drove the development of the RONI. I have used both types of statistics in my research. Given statistics’ pivotal role within this thesis, it is appropriate to carefully examine the NEET statistics and how they are gathered and verified.

### How Local Authority statistics are gathered

In the period covered by this study, all Local Authorities in England, including the one in this study, used the Client Caseload Information Service (CCIS) to compile

statistics relating to the current economic activity of young people. This software package is used to compare the number of NEETs with the number of young people participating in education across local authorities. Until 2011, CCIS used the actual age of the young person to record activity. Therefore, any young person who was aged 18 was included until they reached their 19th birthday. The CCIS now records young people until their academic age of 18. Academic age is the person's age on the 31<sup>st</sup> of August of any year. This change from using actual age to academic age was made to align the CCIS system with other government statistics. This means that in comparing pre-2011 local CCIS statistics and later local CCIS statistics one needs to take into account the fact that slightly different statistical 'populations' have been used to compile local NEET figures.

#### How NEET and associated data are gathered

The Client Caseload Information System (CCIS) was used by Connexions (DCSF, 2009) and other official organisations supplying careers information and guidance to young people. CCIS collects destination data on all pupils in the Autumn following the date on which they reach the official school leaving age and then at intervals thereafter. This information can provide in-depth pupil-level statistical information to Local Authorities and schools. The system builds on information gathered by schools on 13-year-olds and allows information advice and guidance to be given before leaving school. Once a young person has left statutory education, the database is updated by personal advisors who aim to have contact with all the young people aged 16 to 18 in their area. Destination information is gathered by education establishments who alert Connexions, or similar organisations, to young people attending their institutions. Connexions then contacts those young people aged 16 to 18 who do not appear on any list. Through this system normally 98 percent of 16-year-olds are assigned to a category: NEET; employed; in education or training; or unavailable (McGregor, Clelland & Reid, 2006). These data are shared with other agencies, subject to the young person's consent.

The CCIS system used by Local Authorities defines young people as either NEET or EET (in employment, education or training). For CCIS purposes, NEET is defined as: young people who are unemployed, not in education or training and those not active in the labour market through being ill, a teenage parent, a young carer,

pregnant or not available for other reasons, e.g., those undertaking personal development opportunities.

Conversely, EET is defined as: those in full-time post-16 education; full-time employment (with and without training); work-based learning (employed and non-employed); other Government-supported training; temporary employment; part-time learning; and part-time employment. CCIS data do not include those in custody or those taking a gap year.

This system allows young people who are described as NEET to be traced back to the last school they attended. The school figures are represented by a percentage of the overall NEETs and are reported monthly to the school. For example, in the Local Authority in this study 279 NEET young people were traced back to schools within the Local Authority. Each school's total is given as a percentage of the overall NEET figure. The school in my study was attributed 30 pupils who subsequently became NEET, that is 7.7 percent of the overall NEET figure for the Local Authority (source: private conversations with School Management Team, 2008). Such attribution enables a school's performance on information, advice and guidance to be compared with other schools in a Local Authority area and across Local Authorities. Many schools are concerned about the fairness of this approach as they argue that when these young people have gone on to colleges and then subsequently dropped out, their NEET status cannot be the school's fault. However, all schools are attributed NEET pupil figures in the same way so that comparisons can be made (source: private conversations with School Management Team, 2005-2012). This is not the only controversy with regard to the way in which these statistics are gathered. The CCIS software system has an in-built mechanism for attributing a status to young people who personal advisors are unable to contact. This is based on currency values and a mathematical formula, as described next.

### CCIS Currency values

Once the CCIS data are collected, there is a currency value attached to the data. For example, for those young people reported as being in employment the currency value is two years. Therefore, if no change is reported, a young person remains categorised as in work for two years. The accuracy of this interpretation of status relies on the

initial information gathered from schools, training providers and colleges being correct. Despite these contacts and efforts by Personal Advisors to contact all young people, some young people slip through the net.

#### *Not known*

All young people for whom current activity cannot be confirmed within the currency period are classified by DfE as “Current Situation Not Known”. This category is made up of young people: who cannot be contacted; who have refused to disclose activity; or whose current destination is time-expired under the currency rules. It is these ‘unknowns’ who cause the statistical gatherers and analysts the most difficulty. If young people cannot be traced in the first instance and their currency status ends, they may be NEET, or EET or in a subgroup of EET: those in work but not receiving any training or education (NET). This anomaly has been addressed by allowing the software to predict what has happened to these young people and to make a statistical adjustment to the NEET figure.

#### *Adjusted NEET*

Once the currency tables were introduced in 2003 a statistical adjustment was sought to allow for the difficulty in contacting young people and ascertaining their updated status. From DCSF (2007a) research it was determined that of those who lapsed from EET, some 92 percent were likely to be still EET, therefore only the remaining 8 percent were counted as NEET. For those who lapsed from NEET, 58 percent re-joined as NEET, therefore the remainder, 42 percent of the total, would be EET (DCSF Advisor, personal communication, 8/2/08). These assumptions are applied to those whose currency has lapsed during the reporting period to give an adjusted NEET figure. Thus the formula assumes that: 8 percent of the lapsed EETs are NEET; 58 percent of the lapsed NEETs are NEET; and also 92 percent of the lapsed EETs are EET; and 42 percent of the lapsed NEETs are EET. Once these lapsed figures are added in, the recalculated figures (NEET/EET + NEET) give the adjusted NEET percentage. This adjusted NEET figure allows for comparing the figures within the same Local Authority month on month, year on year, and allows for comparisons between Local Authorities to be made nationally.

However, this formula may be misleading, especially when taking into account local economic features. It may not be the case that those EET young people are 92 percent likely to be still EET in a Local Authority such as that in this study that has 30,000 adults with below Level 2 qualifications and a declining job market. The danger is that there may be many more ‘unknowns’ and potentially vulnerable young people than the statistics indicate. In recognition of this potential underestimation and its potential consequences for the young people, each Local Authority is also set targets to reduce the number of young people whose status is unknown once they have a lapsed currency (DCSF Advisor, personal communication, 8/2/08).

### Statistics for the Local Authority featured in this study

In the end-of-year 2011 DfE statistics the Local Authority was reported as having an adjusted NEET figure of 6.6 percent and an adjusted ‘unknown’ figure of 11.3 percent. These figures are calculated using a new residential criterion that was introduced in September 2011. This means that young people resident in the Local Authority are counted, whereas before 2011 CCIS data counted all young people who attended secondary school within the Local Authority, whether they lived in the Local Authority area or not. This change, alongside the change previously discussed with regards to academic/actual age, means that any comparison of pre- and post-2011 local CCIS statistics needs to take into account the fact that slightly different statistical populations have been used to compile the local NEET figures. These changes are reported in the government’s Statistical First Release (SFR) (DfE, 2011b) to have the effect of raising the percentages of young people who are reported as NEET. This appears to be true, as, in 2010, 6.7 percent of young people in the Local Authority were deemed to be (adjusted) unknown.

It could also be true that other factors, for instance, the Great Recession starting in 2008, could have an effect, as could subsequent cuts in local government funding, which may mean that there are fewer Personal Advisors to trace young people and allocate a correct status to them.

## National NEET figures

National figures for young people's economic activity are reported in the SFR. These are the authoritative national estimates of the number of young people classified as NEET and Not in Education or Training (NET). They are published annually in the publication *Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 Year Olds in England* by the Department for Education (DfE 2013). The total number of NEETs in this publication is calculated by first establishing the number of young people classified as NET, i.e., the population of 16 to 18-year-olds minus those known to be in education and training. Then using the Labour Force Survey (LFS) of the employment circumstances of 60,000 households in the UK, an estimation is made of what proportion of the NET group is NEET. The LFS survey is then used to predict trends and numbers of unemployed, part-time employed, occupations and family units for all of the UK (LFS, 2012).

UK national SFR figures in December 2012 (DfE 2013), i.e., during my data collection period, give the percentage of young people classified as NEET at age 16 as 2.8 percent, at age 17 as 6.7 percent and at age 18 as 14.5 percent. The NEET figure overall is an average of the 16, 17 and 18-year-old figures and was therefore reported as 8.1 percent for the end of 2011. It is this overall average figure that is used to set targets for central government, even though it is apparent that this total, obscures the high percentage (14.5 percent) of 18-year-olds classified as NEET.

There could be various explanations for this rise in NEETs at 18, including a relationship to the earlier increase from 16 to 17, which in turn could indicate a 'drop-out rate' where 16 and then 17-year-olds have enrolled and started courses that they subsequently do not like or that do not meet their needs and or aspirations. In addition, 18-year-olds can claim welfare benefits and are therefore more visibly 'in the system', whereas this is not an option for most 16 and 17-year-olds, who are not able to claim welfare benefits unless they have recently left care (UK Government, n.d.). Furthermore, whilst 96.1 percent of 16-year-olds stayed on in education or work-based learning in the period, at age 17 this figure dropped to 87.2 percent and at age 18 it dropped to 61 percent (DfE 2013). There is also evidence that a young person at age 16 or 17 who leaves full-time education and enters into 'employment

with no training' is three times more likely to become NEET at 18 (Rennison et al., 2005).

### Quarterly Brief publication

This is a publication produced every quarter by the DfE and formally by the DCSF to monitor progress on the NEET figures. This publication is the only one in the NEET series to include figures for 16 to 24-year-olds. A breakdown of the overall figure is reported in terms of 16 to 18-year-olds and 19 to 24-year-olds. This report broadens its statistical population as it takes into account the LFS, information from CCIS and the annual SFR data (DfE 2013). In this way it combines national and local statistics. Rises and falls in reported NEETs through the seasonal quarters are measured. These figures can act as an early warning system for local and national governments, as unseasonal highs in any one quarter could indicate a growing NEET population. Governments could try to change an upward trend before the annual statistics are released. The quarterly figures comparing Quarter 1, 2011 (16 to 18-year-olds; 8.3 percent NEETs) to Quarter 1 2012 (16 to 18-year-olds; 9.8 percent NEETs) show a slight upward trend in NEET figures, although this is not statistically significant.

### Summary

In summary, the different sets of statistics, as discussed above, add to the debate that the allocation of NEET as a category of young people causes difficulty when comparing and interpreting government reports and studies and their findings. Statistics form an integral part of target-setting, government policy and monitoring. However, as shown above, NEET status is subject to many different interpretations. Local and national statistics seem at times to contradict each other. The different status indicated by different acronyms NET, EET, NEET, adds to the confusion, as do the terms of 'unknown' and 'adjusted NEET'. All of these need to be unpicked and examined to form a picture of young people's 'real' status and the circumstances which led them to their current status. It is necessary to understand these statistics for the part they have played within this research because statistics continue to be used by national government to set and monitor Local Authorities' performance on the reduction of NEETS and the reduction of 'unknowns'. Furthermore, the local

statistics that are broken down and traced back to schools they are used to monitor the schools' intervention plans and success in delivering information advice and guidance. Statistics could also be used to measure whether the interventions put in place as a result of identifying young people as potential NEETs (using RONIs) has had an effect on the number of NEETs attributed to the school.

Whilst I believe that it is legitimate and useful to use statistics to understand issues of NEETness, the imperfections within these figures should not be ignored and should be borne in mind when considering the impact that such discrepancies have on reported figures or the subsequent work carried out on the basis of those statistics. All statistics need to be understood within the context of their production.

### Next Steps, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) and the Youth Cohort Survey (YCS) Cohort 13

In this section I discuss data from two large surveys used in the identification of risk factors for becoming NEET and in the development of the RONI used by the school in this study. The surveys are the Youth Cohort Survey (YCS) Cohort 13 and Next Steps, formerly the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) (DCSF/ONS, 2008, 2009; DfE/ONS, 2010, 2011). These surveys allow in-depth analysis of young people's lives over time.

The YCS is a series of longitudinal surveys of an academic year group (cohort) of young people in the Spring following their completion of compulsory education, and then again, one, two and/or three years later. Each survey of a cohort is referred to as a 'sweep'. The YCS collects data on education, qualifications and jobs, as well as some background socio-economic information about families and their attitudes. The YCS series dates back to 1985, when Cohort 1 Sweep 1 took place. Since then there have been 13 YCS cohorts and 45 sweeps. From Cohort 13, YCS cohorts were selected by taking a random sample of pupils in Year 11 from the Pupil Level Annual School Census in England. YCS13 collected most Year 11 qualification data from the National Pupil Database which provides information on individuals' attainment and on their schools.



Next Steps is a study of young people's transitions from education into work. It is a single cohort study which has tracked a sample of young people from age 13/14 (Year 9) in Spring/Summer 2004 in order to understand their development from their early teens while still in education (as compared to the YCS which starts post-16). Interviews (known as 'waves') take place annually, initially only via face-to-face home interviews using Computer Aided Personal Interviewing, and later also via telephone, or on-line interviews. The survey interviews 15,500 young people each year (and their parents until Wave 4) (UK Government Schools, Colleges and Children's Services, n.d.) covering topics such as: attitudes to school and involvement in education; parental expectations and aspirations and risk factors such as absence from school, truancy, police contact and bullying (UK Government Schools, Colleges and Children's Services, n.d.).

Respondents of YCS Cohort 13 and Next Steps were taken from the same academic cohort. Many of the questions were the same for both surveys, thus allowing for the combination of responses, giving a larger sample. This larger sample enables the analysis to be refined, for example, to show gender differences within breakdown by ethnic origin (UK Government Schools, Colleges and Children's Services, n.d.).

The publications which reported the data from these surveys were published annually from 2008 to 2011. These publications use the data collected from young people who, collectively, were referred to as 'Cohort 13'. These young people were interviewed for the first time in 2004 and then annually until 2010 (see Table 1 for further clarification). The data presented in these publications link circumstances with outcomes (e.g., the relationship between a child's parents' occupations and the young person's subsequent educational achievement). In this way the publications identify some shared characteristics of different groups of young people, including those who are NEET. The following table shows when the statistics were gathered and published:

Table 1

*Key surveys and publications*

Year of interview	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Academic age of young person interviewed	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
The survey they were part of, i.e., Next Steps (LSYPE) or YCS Cohort 13	LSYPE Wave 1	LSYPE Wave 2	LSYPE Wave 3	LSYPE Wave 4	LSYPE Wave 5	LSYPE Wave 6	LSYPE Wave 7
				YCS Sweep 1	YCS Sweep 2	YCS Sweep 3	YCS Sweep 4
The results of both surveys and interviews are combined and appear in the following publications published by National Statistics →	In 2008					2009	2010
	The Activities and Experiences of 16 (17, 18 19) year olds				‘ditto’ Aged 17	‘ditto’ Aged 18	‘ditto’ Aged 19

LSYPE and the YCS and the official publications based on them and detailed above have been widely quoted in research papers (e.g., Tunnard, Flood & Barnes, 2008) and publications by the Prince’s Trust (McNally & Telhaj, 2010) and the National Foundation for Educational Research, (Filmer-Sankey & McCrone, 2012; Southcott et al, 2013) government official documents of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF, 2007a; DCSF, 2007b; DCSF, 2008b; DCSF, 2008c; DCSF, 2009) and the media (Eason, 2007) as authoritative sources of information regarding NEET statistics and characteristics. As previously noted, these data have been used as recently as December 2017 in research briefing papers for the House of Commons (Powell, 2017) and as such are the most current data available.

The publications entitled *The Activities and Experiences of 16 (17, 18 and 19) year olds* (DCSF/ONS, 2008; 2009; DfE/ONS, 2010; 2011) reveal the characteristics of

those young people likely to become NEET. For example, they indicate that young people in receipt of FSM at age 15 make up 25 percent of NEETs; this figure is deemed noteworthy because young people in receipt of FSM at 15 only account for 11 percent of the general population. This suggests that the probability of becoming NEET for young people in receipt of FSM at age 15 is twice that of young people not in receipt of FSM.

### Characteristics of NEETs identified by the YCS and LSYPE

Table 2 shows the percentages of the whole statistical sample population (i.e., the respondents of the YCS and the LSYPE surveys) compared with the NEET population identified as such by the YCS and LSYPE studies. The purpose of this table is to show what percentage of the NEET group has certain characteristics and whether these percentages are higher or lower than for the general population. The percentages in the NEET group can only be considered useful as a means for identifying characteristics of the NEET group if they vary considerably from the general population.

Table 2 reveals differences between the general population and the NEET population surveyed in the specified areas. This table serves to illustrate the statistical probability of becoming NEET if characteristics are present. There appears to be a slightly greater possibility of becoming NEET if one is male, has not achieved five good GCSEs, is in receipt of free school meals, has a disability and is the child of someone who works in a routine occupation. The gender pattern is noteworthy. At ages 16 and 17 it would appear that females are represented in the NEET group less than would be expected, given that 49.5 percent of the young people surveyed are female, whereas 41 percent of the NEET population are female. Interestingly, at age 19, females account for 50 percent of the general population and 50 percent of the NEET population in the survey. This could be because young women who are pregnant and or looking after a child are counted as NEET and at age 19 more may be in this position than at age 17 or age 18, although I have found no statistics to confirm this hunch. Disability also appears to be a factor in becoming NEET that becomes statistically higher at age 19. I would suggest that many disabled young people are in education until age 18, however, the transition at age 19 to work or

further education or training may be more difficult for them than for their non-disabled peers.

The truancy statistics are self-reported (and therefore possibly misreported) and persistent truancy is categorised as 20 percent non-attendance, which equates to missing school one day a week. Table 2 does not illustrate the link between low attendance at school and the prospects of obtaining qualifications. Government statistics have linked persistent truancy and low attendance to low achievement and the likelihood of obtaining five good GCSEs, stating in 2011 that: only three percent of pupils who miss more than 50 percent of school, manage to achieve five GCSE A\* to C grades including English and Mathematics<sup>9</sup>. Of the pupils missing ten percent to 20 percent of school, 35 percent managed to achieve five GCSE A\* to C grades including English and Mathematics. This is in contrast to those pupils who miss less than five percent, 73 percent of whom achieved five GCSE A\* to C grades including English and Mathematics (DfE 2011b).

Ten percent non-attendance at school is the equivalent of 20 days within a typical school year, which on average is 198 days, or just over six days per term of non-attendance. This falls far short of the definition of persistent truancy at 20 percent non-attendance yet, according to government figures, this amount of lost days has an effect on achievement. Also, as indicated in Table 2, a lack of qualifications is associated with an increase in the likelihood of becoming NEET. Low attendance, defined as just below 95 percent attendance, is inextricably linked to the issue of securing qualifications, thus low attendance is linked to NEETness and could therefore be a characteristic of those at risk of becoming NEET.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Five good GCSEs' refers to five GCSE grades A\* to C, including Mathematics and English as the statistics were gathered after 2008 and before the changes in GCSE grades effective from 2018.

Table 2

*Comparing the characteristics of all the participants against those classified as NEET*

	Number of young people surveyed aged 16 = 19114 NEETs = 1529		Number of young people surveyed aged 17 = 16647 NEETs = 1332		Number of young people surveyed aged 18 = 14786 NEETs = 2218		Number of young people surveyed aged 19 = 12930 NEETs = 1810	
Characteristic	population	% whole	population	% NEET	population	% whole	population	% NEET
White	85%	85%	85%	85%	85%	90%	85%	91%
Non-white	15%	15%	15%	15%	15%	10%	15%	9%
Female	49.5%	41%	49.4%	43.2%	49%	46%	50%	50%
Male	50.5%	50.5%	50.6%	50.5%	51%	54%	50%	50%
Not achieved 5+ A* to C grades GCSE	41%	79%	41%	80%	41%	65%	41%	84%
Achieved at least 5+ A* to C grades GCSE	59%	21%	59%	20%	59%	35%	59%	16%
No FSM	80%	70%	80%	70%	80%	70%	80%	73%
Yes FSM	11%	25%	11%	25%	11%	22%	11%	27%
Yes disability	4%	7%	3.8%	8%	8%	11%	9%	17%
No disability	96%	93%	95%	82%	90%	89%	90%	83%
Persistent truancy at age 16	4%	7.2%	3.7%	13%	Not reported			
Excluded at age 16					1%	3%	1%	3%
Below are some examples of parental occupational differences. These were chosen to represent the high, middle and lower occupational categories								
Parents' occupation professional	6.5%	1.6%	6.8%	2.5%	6.9%	4.5%	6.9%	2.4%
Parents' occupation lower professional	37%	18%	37%	14%	38%	23%	38%	24%
Parents' occupation routine	17%	26%	17%	30%	16.7%	28%	16.7%	27%

*Note.* These figures were obtained by an examination of data contained in 'The main activities at 16 (17, 18, 19) by selected characteristics' from the following publications: DCSF/ONS (2008) Table 6.12, p.3; DCSF/ONS (2009) Table 5.1.1, p.30; DfE/ONS (2010) Table 2.1.1, p.6; and DfE/ONS (2011) Table 1.11, p.5. As stated in these publications: Figures may not always sum to the total weighted

sample due to those cases for which data are missing, not applicable, refused or responding ‘don’t know’.

The formula used for each figure is as follows. The number of young people classified as white (16,311) is divided by the whole statistical population (19,114) and then the result is multiplied by 100. This means that 85 percent of the whole population are classified as white. The DCSF/ONS (2008, p.5) table states that 8 percent of young people classified as white are NEET. Therefore, 8 percent of 16,311, i.e., 1304 young people who are NEET are classified as white. The number of young people who are NEET and white (1304) is divided by the total number of young people who are NEET (1529) then multiplied by 100, meaning that 85 percent of the NEET population are classified as white. This formula is repeated for each classification.

The above table reveals interesting differences between the general population of young people surveyed and the NEET group, namely that those young people who are in receipt of FSM, or whose parents are in routine occupations, or who are disabled or whose attendance at school is erratic are over-represented in the NEET category. This is one way to highlight differences between the general population and the NEET population. The publications from the YCS and LSYPE use such tables to illustrate the probability of becoming NEET.

#### The statistical probability of becoming NEET

In Table 3 below I have used information from the publications *The Activities and Experiences of 16 (17, 18 and 19) year olds* produced by the Department for Children Schools and Families in 2008 and 2009 and then by the Department for Education in 2010 and 2011 (DCSF/ONS, 2008; DCSF/ONS, 2009; DfE/ONS 2010; DfE/ONS, 2011) and re-assembled these data into age groups to show key characteristics associated with being NEET. Table 3 shows the percentage of young people who are NEET, given the presence of the described characteristic, as compared to a person without the described characteristic. For example, at age 16 young people who were in receipt of FSM at age 15 make up 16 percent of NEETs, whereas for those who did not receive FSM at age 15 the percentage drops to only 7 percent. In other words, a 16-year-old is more than twice as likely to be NEET if in


receipt of FSM at 15. As FSM is a measure of poverty, or at least low income within a family, this statistic adds weight to the idea that poverty is associated with poor educational and life outcomes. Data collected at ages 16, 17, 18 and 19 show how the effect of a characteristic is often compounded over time. For example, at age 19, 34 percent of young people who were in receipt of FSM at age 15 were NEET. This is 22 percentage points higher than those not in receipt of FSM. This gap has widened as at age 16 there was a 9 percentage points difference between those in receipt of FSM and those not. This would suggest that the impact of being in receipt of FSM at age 15 is compounded over time.

Table 3 illustrates that young people are more likely to be NEET at 16 if they do not achieve five good GCSEs. 15.6 percent of young people are NEET who do not have these qualifications, whereas only two percent of those achieving five good GCSEs are NEET. At age 19 the percentage of NEETs without five good GCSEs (at age 16) increases to 28 percent, compared to 6 percent of 19 year olds who did get five good GCSEs. This would imply an increased likelihood of becoming NEET at age 19 if a young person does not have five good GCSEs at 16 but also a rise in the likelihood of becoming NEET if a young person does have five good GCSEs.

Table 3 also shows that of those whose parents have professional occupations only five percent will be NEET at age 19. For those young people with parents in routine occupations this rises to 23 percent. Therefore, the probability of becoming NEET if one's parents are in routine occupations is more than four times greater than if one's parents are classed as professionals. Although not illustrated in Table 3 (no actual numbers are reported) it is noteworthy that the YCS and LSYPE publications in 2008 report young people who state that they were bullied (defined as name calling, social exclusion, extortion, being threatened or being hit) at age 13 or 14 were twice as likely to be NEET at age 16. These young people also did "substantially worse in their GCSE exams than those who stated that they were not bullied" (DCSF 2008b, p.11). Young people in families in routine occupations are also more likely to be NEET (13 per cent, compared with just two per cent of those whose parents were in higher professional occupations).

Table 3

*The percentage of young people who are NEET given set criteria<sup>10</sup>*

Characteristic/Category 	% of all young people who were surveyed at age 16 (n=19,114) in 2007 and who were both NEET and in the category described	% of all young people who were surveyed at age 17 (n=16,647) in 2008 and who were both NEET and in the category described	% of all young people who were surveyed at age 18 (n=14,786) in 2009 and who were both NEET and in the category described	% of all young people who were surveyed at age 19 (n=12,930) in 2010 and who were both NEET and in the category described
Not in receipt of FSM at 15	7%	7%	13%	12%
In receipt of FSM at 15	16%	17%	29%	34%
Young person achieved 5+ A*-C GCSEs at age 16	2%	2.7%	8.7%	6%
Young person did not achieve 5+ A*-C GCSEs at 16	15.6%	16%	25.2%	28%
A young person who does not have SEN	8%	7%	15%	13%
A young person with SEN	15%	17%	22%	28%
** Parental occupation higher professional	2%	3%	10%	5%
** Parental occupation routine	13%	14%	21%	23%
** Parental education degree	2%	3%	11%	Not reported
** Parental education below A level GCE	11%	11%	18%	Not reported

<sup>10</sup> I have constructed this table using the information presented in tables entitled 'The main activities at 16 (17,18, 19) by selected characteristics' from the following publications: DCSF/ONS (2008) Table 6.12, p.3; DCSF/ONS (2009) Table 5.1.1, p.30; DfE/ONS (2010) Table 2.1.1 p.6; and DfE/ONS (2011) Table 1.1.1, p.5.

\*\* These comparisons were purposely chosen to represent the difference between the 'top' and 'bottom' of this stratification.



In summary, the statistics and tables outlined above present a picture of the key characteristics that increase a young person's risk of becoming NEET at 16 and beyond. The conclusion is that young people who obtain qualifications, stated as five good GCSEs at age 16, are on a pathway to better outcomes than those 16-year-olds who do not achieve this qualifications benchmark. However, these statistics cannot explain why some young people, despite having many of the identified characteristics of NEETs, are not NEET. There is no inevitability of young people becoming NEET; for example, 40 percent (n = 6660) of the respondents aged 17 in the YCS and LSYPE sample did not achieve five good GCSEs and 16 percent (n = 1068) of those surveyed at age 17 are classified as NEET. Therefore 84 percent (n = 5592) of those surveyed aged 17 without five good GCSEs are not NEET. This point is further illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

*Percentage of NEETs and non-NEETs with characteristics listed*

Factor at aged 18 Total surveyed (n=14786). Some questions were not responded to by all those surveyed	Number of population surveyed with characteristic listed	Not NEET with characteristic listed	NEET with characteristic listed
Free school meals Yes	1703	1209	494
Free school meals No	11929	11379	1550
Achieved 8+ A*-C grade GCSEs	6858	6310	548
Achieved 5-7 A*-C grade GCSEs	2073	1845	228
Achieved 1-4 A*-C grade GCSEs	3009	2528	481
Achieved 5+ D-G grade GCSEs	1552	1149	403
Achieved 1-4 D-G grade GCSEs	715	415	300
No GCSEs	560	275	285

*Note. I have constructed this table from data taken from (DCSF/ONS, 2008, p.3, Table 6.12).*

This table, unlike the previous tables which indicate the probability of becoming NEET when young people have certain characteristics, illustrates that young people without these characteristics do still become NEET and do so in significant numbers. For example, 1550 of those identified as NEET were not in receipt of free school meals. This is an important point because even if all those in receipt of free school meals did not become NEET there would still be significant numbers of young people classified as NEET. However, there is a caveat to this, as discussed earlier, the complexity and diversity of the classification of NEET does not lend itself to easy interpretation of statistics. Many of these young people classified as NEET may be interns, or on a gap year. If the statistics do not give more information regarding the actual status of young people, then all these statistics are open to interpretation and possibly misinterpretation and criticism. This in turn has implications for

government policy and intervention. This examination of these statistics gives further evidence of the complexity of the NEET discourse.

### The RONI in relation to this study

Notwithstanding criticism of the use of these statistics to predict the risk of becoming NEET, I used these statistics within my role in the Local Authority to develop a RONI in April 2008, before my CASE Studentship started. To my knowledge this was one of the first such indicators devised and as such, I was not able to draw on any reviews of RONIs that might have guided me in my task. Subsequently, a review by the National Federation of Education Research (NFER) was published in 2012 (Filmer-Sankey & McCrone, 2012); this is discussed below. This section explains why the tool was instigated, why certain characteristics of NEETs were highlighted in its use, and how the tool was intended to be used as an instrument to alert schools in the Local Authority to those children who might be at risk of becoming NEET at age 16. The section ends with a brief overview of NFER's review of RONIs (Filmer-Sankey & McCrone, 2012).

At the outset of the study the RONI was expected to be used in every cohort in every secondary school in the Local Authority and an evaluation of the subsequent interventions arising from it would have formed the basis of this thesis. As has been explained in the Introduction, this changed as the study developed in response to circumstances outside my control. However, the RONI was later used by the School to select the Intervention Class that I worked with and observed in this study (see Chapter 4), therefore the principles employed in its design are outlined here. The RONI and its subsequent use in this study also serve to highlight how collaborative research, such as that undertaken in a CASE Studentship, is situated in a complex web of relationships, necessitating a degree of pragmatism on the part of the CASE partners and the researcher.

### Introduction to the RONI

The RONI tool was devised by carefully examining the statistics reported in the YCS and LSYPE and from this, identifying characteristics of the NEET group, as previously explored. I will turn my attention to the background information which

positions this work in context in the following sections. These cover: how the tool was devised, including discussions of the characteristics of NEETS and how these should be weighted within the tool; the piloting of the tool and its evaluation; further development of the tool, including: the presentation of the tool to Head Teachers; the consequences of the change of Government in May 2010 (which led to changes in the research strategy); and collaborative working and the use of the RONI in one school.

### Background to the development of the RONI

In 2008 the Local Authority submitted and agreed with national government a Local Area Agreement (LAA). LAAs combined national standards and priorities with the visions and priorities of local areas. All 150 Local Authorities were required to have an LAA, which was negotiated with the Regional Government Office. They were the main way for central government to work with Local Authorities; they underpinned the national performance framework which measured progress towards Government targets. There were in total 188 national indicators/targets which covered performance in all areas of local government including health, welfare, housing, employment, education, communities, economic development policing, community safety and the environment. The agreement was intended to last until 2011.

The Local Authority in the study chose to concentrate on making progress in 29 of the 188 national indicators. One of these targets was to reduce the number of young people aged 16 to 19 who were classified as NEET. In 2008 the NEET figure for the Local Authority was 9.7 percent and the target for 2011 was 8 percent.

A NEET Board was established by the Local Authority to guide a strategy which would achieve these aims. This Board included representation from outside agencies, for example, Connexions, and internal Local Authority departments responsible for such issues as admissions and attendance, safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults, school improvement services, 14-19 Skills and Learning managers, the Youth Offending Team and those working with teenage parents. This list is not exhaustive and other interested parties attended the Board meetings at different times. The core attendees were Local Authority first tier group managers from across sectors who reported directly to the Corporate Director. They all presided over teams of officers

who were charged with carrying out the actions prescribed. This lower tier of officers also reported to the Board on progress made and hurdles to be overcome.

In a report circulated to NEET Board members summarising the findings from research commissioned by the Greater London Authority (Mayor of London, 2007) into what works in preventing and re-engaging young people NEET in London, four critical success factors were identified: the forensic use of management information; adopting best practice in information advice and guidance; advocacy and brokerage; and managing alignment with pre- and post-16 education provision by trialling improved incentives for participation.

On the basis of this research and the subsequent meeting of the Local Authority's NEET Board in 2008, a revised NEET strategy was proposed by senior officers of the Local Authority who reported directly to the Corporate Director. This document called for statistical analysis of information held on the schools and Connexions databases and the development of a tool to identify those young people who were most vulnerable to becoming NEET in order to instigate interventions which would reduce the NEET figures. In my role as an employee of the Local Authority's Education Department I was directed to undertake this work within the parameters set by the NEET Board and report to my line manager.

### Development of the RONI

I identified a core set of characteristics of those identified by the studies reviewed above as associated with becoming NEET (DCSF/ONS 2008) from examining two longitudinal studies, the YCS and the LSYPE and the reports generated from these and other relevant studies discussed in Chapter One, for example, Malcolm et al. (2003), Broadhurst et al. (2005), Schoon and Bynner (2003) and DCSF (2008a).

The key measurable characteristics of NEETs of interest to the Local Authority<sup>11</sup> are discussed earlier in this chapter and summarised here as:

- Low/under-achievement: 79 percent of NEETs identified in the YCS and LSYPE do not have a full Level 2 qualification (DCSF/ONS, 2008);

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<sup>11</sup> The Local Authority chose not to include ethnicity as a category in this context.

- Poverty: 16 percent of those categorized as NEET by the YCS and LSYPE at age 16 were in receipt of FSM at 15, as opposed to 7 percent of NEETs who did not receive FSM at 15 (DCSF/ONS, 2008);
- Gender: boys are slightly more likely to become NEET than girls;
- Attendance: low levels of school attendance and correspondingly high levels of truancy are linked with under-achievement; of those who are persistent truants, 7.2 percent are identified as NEET (DCSF/ONS, 2008);
- Bullying: those who report being bullied are twice as likely to become NEET (DCSF/ONS, 2008);
- Special Educational Needs (SEN): 15 percent of young people with SEN were categorized as NEET at age 16 as opposed to 8 percent of those with no SEN at age 16 (DCSF/ONS, 2008).

After establishing the key measurable characteristics of potential NEETs, I met with the Local Authority's Information and Data Manager, who told me what data on pupils were routinely gathered by schools. I was informed that this information included: gender; school attended; attendance records; achievement data from end of Key Stages, for example, Statutory Assessment Tests (SATs) at the end of Years 6 and 9; and whether a child was in receipt of FSM; a looked-after child (UK Government Schools, colleges and children's services, n.d.) or if they had a Statement regarding additional needs.

To test if a tool using this information would be useful I allocated points to each of the above categories based on an assessment of which characteristics appeared from my reading of the research to have the most effect on a young person's risk of becoming NEET. Such weighting systems are widely used in risk management, including in the financial industry, where, for example, past investment performance and velocity of change in currency value are taken into account, and in medical prevention, where, for example, risk factors associated with becoming diabetic include being overweight, having high blood pressure, high cholesterol and having a family member with diabetes. This process of weighting variables and assessing risk factors is an established statistical method also used in the Social Sciences to establish risk by making an association between variables and outcomes. Statistical models employed include linear regression, bivariate and multiple linear regression

models (Howell, 2002). However, I was unable to conduct these tests as I did not have access to the raw data to do so. As a result, points were allocated by closely examining the statistics in the YCS and LSYPE publications (in the first instance using data from DCSF/ONS 2008, and later in the revisions using data from 2009 DfE/ONS 2010, 2011). These longitudinal studies aim to provide evidence on the key factors affecting educational progression and post-16 transitions. The statistical comparisons that appear in these studies and the assertions of difference made are only included in the YCS and LSYPE publications if they met statistical significance testing at a probability level of .05 (DCFS/ONS, 2008, p.54). Therefore, my predictions and weighting system were inductive, based on sound reasoning (Dodge, 2003) so far as this was possible. Points were allocated to indicate the level of risk associated with certain factors as follows:

- Gender: males were allocated one risk factor point and females zero points as females were slightly less represented in the NEET statistics presented in the YCS and LSYPE publications. As illustrated in Table 2 earlier in this chapter, females made up 49.5 percent of the general population surveyed but only 41 percent of the NEET population surveyed
- Those in receipt of FSM were allocated one risk factor point as they were over-represented in the NEET statistics presented in the YCS and the LSYPE publications. As illustrated in Table 2 in Chapter 2, young people in receipt of FSM at age 15 are twice as likely to become NEET than those who at 15 did not receive FSM.
- Looked-after children (LAC) were not specifically identified in the YCS or the LSYPE publication, however, it came to my attention through other reading that LAC were significantly underachieving (Colton & Heath, 1994). There were 160 children of school age in the Local Authority with LAC status in 2008. In recognition of this added hurdle to achievement, if a child had looked-after status, one point of risk factor was awarded

Some characterises of young people becoming NEET were not simply categorical, such as receiving FSM, rather they were more fluid. Attendance and achievements were very significant characteristics, as shown in Table 2, and more importantly characteristics that could be addressed through interventions. This was the aim of the Local Authority. As it was envisaged by the Local Authority that the interventions

would concentrate on attendance and achievement, I allocated more points to these characteristics as follows.

Attendance: if a pupil's attendance were at 85 percent or lower, three risk factor points were allocated as the Local authority believed this was a high-risk factor. This is because the link between poor attendance and achievement has been established and confirmed by government reports. Pupils with this level of non-attendance are less likely to achieve five good GCSEs (as discussed in Chapter 1). 85 percent attendance or less was considered by schools and the Local Authority Attendance Team as the level of attendance that needed to be investigated by Attendance Officers.

Low achievement was also identified as a risk factor. If at Key Stage 2, aged 11, a student's SAT results were below the national expectation of Level 4 in English they were awarded three risk factor points, in Mathematics they were awarded two points and in Science two points. This differential between Mathematics/Science and English was justified given the necessity for these skills to be used across the curriculum.

Under-achievement was similarly identified. A student who makes less than the expected two levels of progress, equivalent to 12 points on the National Curriculum scale, between Key Stage 1 at age 7 and Key Stage 2 at age 11, is at risk of not reaching basic national minimum qualifications by the end of statutory schooling. Therefore, if the difference between a student's Key Stage 1 average point score and their Key Stage 2 average point score were six or less, three points were allocated as a risk factor. Low and under-achievement warranted this level of points because, as previously illustrated in Table 2, young people who do not have five or more good GCSEs are eight times more likely to become NEET than those young people who do have these. Under-achievement and low achievement in Key Stages 2 and 3 were indicators that these pupils were not on target to achieve five good GCSEs by the end of Year 11.

Low achievement and under-achievement are commonly considered a cause for concern in education. Low achievement normally refers to examination performance,



whilst under-achievement is failure to perform to one's potential and make sufficient gains; a pupil could potentially pass an examination or test at the expected level but still be underachieving, based on past performance. Either or both combined raise concern for a pupil's likely outcomes. Educational attainment or lack of is often cited as a reason young people become NEET.

However, targeting interventions that are only geared towards addressing this factor may not be successful as the underlying factors of poor attainment include negative childhood experiences, poor mental health and family expectations (Fergusson & Woodward, 2002; Haas & Fosse, 2008; Rothon, Head, Clark, Klineberg, Cattell & Stansfeld, 2009). The impact of these factors is most stark when considering that 70 percent of young people in care with emotional problems leave school with no qualifications (Akister, Owens & Goodyer, 2010).

Whilst the Local Authority recognised the full plethora of risk factors which were real and statistically proven, they could not change the FSM status of a pupil and there were other interventions and programmes in place directly aimed at those pupils receiving FSM. Therefore, within the RONI scoring system they chose to concentrate on, and award higher points to the tangible aspect of risk they could change, namely: achievement.

In making a decision on how many points would constitute a high risk of becoming NEET I considered two elements: firstly, what would the point score be if a pupil had low attendance coupled with low achievement and one other risk characteristic? The answer was: a score of 8. Secondly, how many pupils in any one academic year in any one school would this model deem to be at high risk of becoming NEET? This mattered because if too many high-risk pupils were identified, schools would not be able to cope; conversely, too few would diminish the usefulness of the tool. In consultation with the Local Authority it was decided that 15 percent of high risk pupils would translate to approximately 36-46 pupils per year group, depending on a school's intake for any one year group. This was a feasible number of pupils for schools to be able to instigate interventions with the resources available. The point system allocated the highest number of points for lack of achievement because the Local Authority believed that a school might be able to help with achievement, thus

lowering a high-risk factor pertaining to becoming NEET, whereas a school, or an individual pupil, could not change other risk factors, such as FSM status or gender.

In order to test if this point score would identify 15 percent of pupils in any one year group, a ‘dummy run’ of the tool was carried out by the Local Authority’s Information and Data Manager for one Year Group (Year 8) in one school. This school was chosen because, according to the Local Authority’s statistics, 7.7 percent of current NEETs had attended the school. This was the highest percentage of all the nine secondary schools within the Local Authority, although these statistics may be unreliable, as discussed earlier. The Local Authority’s Data Manager compiled a dataset which included all pupils in Year 8 in the School. For each pupil, data routinely recorded by schools and sent to the Data Manager included:

- attendance figures given as a percentage attendance rate for the previous term;
- achievement data, recorded as Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 SATs results in English, Mathematics and Science, and the Average Point Score (APS) and improvement or otherwise between these tests;
- gender;
- LAC status;
- FSM status.

The Data Manager used the scoring system that I had devised to allocate points on these criteria. This produced a dataset that highlighted fewer pupils than the 15 percent I thought was necessary to inform schools’ intervention programmes. Accordingly, after examining this ‘dummy run’ dataset I decided, in consultation with the Local Authority, to make some changes as follows.

I changed the three ‘risk’ points allocated if a pupil made less than six expected levels of progress as defined in the National Curriculum (very few pupils were in this category) to three points for any pupil who did not achieve nine levels of expected progress; this was still three levels of progress fewer than the 12 expected. I changed the attendance point allocation to award one point if attendance were below 95 percent, two points for attendance between 90 percent and 85 percent and three points for below 85 percent attendance. This was broadly in line with the targets for

attendance set for schools by Ofsted frameworks, which were between 91 percent and 94 percent. Also, as previously discussed, attendance of just below 95 percent but not as low as 85 percent has, according to government figures, an effect on achievement and therefore this level of non-attendance needed to be captured by the RONI.

After examining the data I was concerned that Special Educational Needs (SEN) had not been allocated any points and I decided to add this element. The data recorded on pupils gave information, not just on SEN Statemented pupils, but also on those in school who were deemed to have a need that could be recorded as School Action or School Action Plus<sup>12</sup>. Accordingly, those pupils with SEN Statements were allocated three points, those pupils receiving help through School Action Plus, two points, and those receiving help through School Action, one point.

I changed the one point allocated to males to zero points as figures released after the first ‘dummy run’ indicated that the Local Authority had almost equal males and females who were NEET (personal communication with TJ Enterprise<sup>13</sup> 2008, June 16). TJ Enterprise was the company employed by the Local Authority to deliver its Careers information advice and guidance, formerly Connexions. With these changes, the dataset for the pupils in the school was run again and the new points allocated and 45 pupils out of 280 emerged as potential NEETs, slightly higher than 15 percent.

An analysis was cross-referenced with data collated by TJ Enterprise and released after the dummy run on current NEETs within the Local Authority. This reaffirmed, to some extent, that the allocation of risk factors and the weighting that they were given to identify those at risk of becoming NEET, were broadly in line with those who were NEET in the Local Authority at that time. TJ Enterprise reported that for the 282 NEETs in the Local Authority that they could trace (the NEET figure in the Local Authority was estimated as 709 young people), an average attendance of 86.7 percent was reported in the year in which they left school and that 90 percent of 207

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<sup>12</sup> School Action and School Action Plus indicate categories of help a pupil might need in school. For School Action, help is provided by the school, while School Action Plus involves outside agencies, such as counsellors.

<sup>13</sup> TJ Enterprise is a pseudonym.

current NEETs for whom they had these data did not attain five A\*–C grades at GCSE including Mathematics and English. However, I noted that this information was only available on 29 percent of the current NEET population in the Local Authority.

This RONI was one of the first to be instigated; others followed throughout the UK. As indicated above, the development process was pragmatic, directed by the Local Authority, and the RONI underwent several changes before the pilot. With hindsight, I recognise that the RONI has limitations, as discussed below in the light of Filmer-Sankey and McCrone's (2012) review of RONIs.

### Piloting the tool

A pilot was instigated using the results from the dataset, as previously described (i.e., the RONI had attributed a high risk to 45 pupils who were in Year 8 at the end of the academic year 2008/2009 who attended the school in question). These data, based on the period from September 2008 to May 2009, were used for this pilot, although the pupils were by then in Year 9<sup>14</sup>.

Senior managers at the school examined the list of pupils identified as high risk, and they removed two pupils from the high risk category because one no longer attended the school and the school had personal knowledge of the other pupil's circumstances which could not be gleaned from the data recorded, e.g., a pupil was awarded three points for low attendance which resulted in a score of 8: high risk. However, this pupil had broken their leg and had a long period of sickness. The resulting non-attendance did not reflect their general attendance pattern and was considered by the school as not an at-risk factor.

The school's senior managers also added four pupils who scored seven points (medium risk) to the high-risk category on the basis of their behaviour in school. Incidences of poor behaviour were recorded by the school but were not part of the overall data collection recorded by the Local Authority centrally and this was

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<sup>14</sup> There is a delay in gathering and disseminating and checking large amounts of data. The data for this tool were available in the November following the end of the previous academic year, e.g., the data-run of the tool in November 2010 used data from academic year 2009/10.

considered by the school to be a cause for concern. With these changes, 47 pupils were identified as at risk of becoming NEET.

The school decided to allocate these pupils to four groups. The group a pupil was assigned to was decided by the school's Senior Management Team on the basis of which group they felt would benefit the pupil most and address the most pressing issue for that pupil.

Two of these groups could be seen as addressing issues behind non-attendance and low achievement:

- The Behaviour Group<sup>15</sup>; a pupil in this group would typically have either many low-level incidents of poor behaviour or have had some form of fixed exclusion in the previous term.
- The Social and Emotional Group; a pupil in this group would typically be female and have issues surrounding personal hygiene and low self-esteem.

The other two groups were more directly focused on the high-risk factors that led the children to gain a high point score. These were:

- The Attainment Group; a pupil in this group would typically be classed as low achieving and not making expected levels of progress.
- The Attendance Group; this consisted of pupils who were attending school less than 90 percent of the time and for whom this was felt by senior managers to be the greatest barrier to their achievement.

It is noteworthy at this juncture to point out that many of the pupils could have been placed in more than one group, as it was difficult to pinpoint one area of concern. Most displayed at least two, and some all four areas of concern. It is also worth noting here that 50 percent of the pupils highlighted were not on the school radar as being 'at risk'. This may be explained by the cumulative nature of point-gathering in the RONI tool which adds factors together, that when presented on their own do not appear to indicate a high risk. Also, the RONI awards points for attendance, the benchmark of which is lower than that used by Attendance Officers. Typically, those

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<sup>15</sup> Data on behaviour were recorded on a school system that allowed teachers of all pupils to record incidents of poor behaviour ranging from non-compliance to more serious incidents, e.g., fighting.

pupils attending school for 85 percent of the time or more would not be alerted to Attendance Officers as at risk and therefore no interventions would be in place.

The school Senior Management Team assigned four members of staff to lead these groups, each of whom was responsible for one group. The action designated for three of the groups was that a teacher would express an interest in a pupil by chatting to them, mostly informally, about their interests in school and the problems they may be having and as such these members of staff were fulfilling a role as a 'significant other' in relation to the pupil. This role was seen as an important aspect of engaging youth as many young people were "desperate for the presence in their lives of stable, long-term relationships with people who can provide the emotional and practical support that they need in order to engage" (Hayward, Hodgson, Johnson, Oancea, Pring, Spours, Wilde & Wright, 2006, p.81). The teachers assigned to the groups were made aware that these pupils had been identified as at high risk of becoming NEET. To my knowledge, other members of staff were not informed of the pupils' designated risk status and neither were the young people so designated, nor their parents or carers.

The only group with an intervention programme was the Social/Emotional Group. The pupils assigned to this group by the school attended ten one-hour weekly sessions which centred on confidence, hygiene and self-esteem.

The pilot was in place for one term and an evaluation was undertaken by the school at the end of this time.

#### Evaluation of the pilot

The evaluation of this pilot for three groups (the Behaviour Group, the Attendance Group and the Achievement Group) simply compared the attendance of children who were placed in the groups in the Summer Term of the 2008/09 academic year with their attendance in the Autumn Term of 2009, together with their recorded instances of behaviour in the Summer Term of the 2008/09 academic year and their recorded instances of behaviour in the Autumn Term of 2009. For those pupils placed in the Attendance Group, attendance had improved in 80 percent of cases, ranging from an improvement from 46 percent attendance in the Summer Term to 78

percent in the following Autumn Term. Those with very poor attendance showed the greatest improvement. However, it was also noted that for the 50 percent of pupils whose attendance had improved, an increase in poor behaviour incidences was also recorded. I could surmise that these pupils were present at school more, but their presence did not indicate re-engagement as it gave them more opportunities for poor behaviour.

In the Behaviour Group 50 percent of pupils recorded fewer incidences of poor behaviour; this improvement represented on average a decrease in incidents by 20 percentage points.

The Achievement Group showed no accelerated improvement. Moreover, they failed to make even the expected levels of progress between the two reporting periods.

The Social/Emotional Group, which received intensive one-hour per week designated time to cover issues such as self-esteem, confidence and personal hygiene, was evaluated by the pupils completing a short questionnaire devised by the school staff. The questionnaire comprised questions such as ‘Do you feel attending this class has raised your confidence?’. The questions were all framed in this positive way. The results were that for all pupils who attended, 100 percent agreed that their self-esteem had been increased, their confidence was higher and that they understood more about personal hygiene than they had done previously.

The implementation of this pilot and its subsequent evaluation by group limited the conclusions that could be reached. However, the pilot showed that without the RONI some pupils were not being identified as they were not considered a priority because they were never quite ‘bad enough’. Their attendance was above the threshold for intervention, their achievements were on the borderline and their other characteristics meant they were not targeted for intervention. The tool showed that these factors added together could indicate a reasonable cause for concern. Interestingly, the school’s evaluation of the pilot and the impact it had on the children highlighted the complexity of individual pupils’ needs. This was a valuable insight. It would seem from this pilot that grouping by type was of limited use in promoting re-engagement. The school concluded that a different approach was

needed if this tool were going to be useful in guiding interventions, i.e., not merely a means to allocate a level of risk of becoming NEET, but rather a way of preventing future NEETness.

#### Further developments relating to the RONI tool

A dataset using the point system and therefore producing lists of pupils who were assessed by the RONI as being at risk of becoming NEET was compiled by the Local Authority's Data Management Team for every year group in every secondary school in the Local Authority. On investigating the results, one further change was made as it became apparent that for Years 10 and 11 it was not appropriate to rely on Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 achievement data to assign points as an indicator of under-achievement. Therefore, a change was made for these year groups, so that if at Key Stage 3, aged 14, a pupil's SAT results were below the national expectation of Level 5 in English they were awarded three points, in Mathematics they were awarded two points and in Science two points. This differential between Mathematics / Science and English was justified given the necessity for English skills to be used across the curriculum. In addition, a pupil who makes less than the expected two levels of progress, equivalent to 12 points on the national curriculum scale, between Key Stage 2 age 11 and Key Stage 3 age 14 is at risk of not reaching basic National minimum qualifications by the end of statutory schooling, therefore if the difference between a pupil's Key Stage 2 average point score and their Key Stage 3 average point score was 9 or less than three points were allocated in the revision of the RONI following the pilot.

A document explaining the RONI within the wider context of pupil disconnection from school was co-produced by myself and a Principal Inspector and was presented at a Head Teachers' Forum (Appendix 1). The production of this document represents a filtering and interpretation of discourses which were drawn upon in one genre (e.g., the forum meeting), and then filtered out in the movement to another (e.g., the document in this case written and disseminated by one person). As Fairclough (2003, p.34) states, the genre chain worked as a regulative device for selecting and privileging some discourses over others. This document presents the NEET problem as one the schools should take responsibility for reducing, with help from the Local Authority. It sets out the balance between universal provision and



specific interventions that will help reduce NEETness. It does not address any budget implications for extra resources. It does not tackle any issues regarding employment opportunities. It represents the NEET issue as an individual problem to be addressed by individual solutions. Thus, it prioritises one view of the construct of NEETness and how it can be solved.

The overall response from Head Teachers was that the RONI and its results were a useful addition to school data and it was therefore broadly welcomed.

In May 2010 a new UK Government was elected and, whilst the impact of this was not felt immediately by this project or indeed the Education Department of the Local Authority, by the start of the academic year 2010/11 it was clear that priorities were changing, and budgets were under threat. Consequently, plans faltered as it was unclear if projects would be able to be completed. There was a major reorganisation of the Education and Children's Services Departments. This led to guidelines that were less clear with regard to priorities. Local Area Agreements were effectively dissolved from 2010; therefore, the targets on NEETs, whilst still remaining a local concern, were not part of any agreement with Central Government. The academic year 2010/11 was an interim year where the development of the RONI and the interest shown in it by my senior officers and many of the original NEET group members was far less on the agenda. I was uninvited to many group meetings that I had once been a part of. This had an impact on my level of understanding and knowledge of the overall strategy regarding young people in the Local Authority who were or were likely to become NEET. It also marked the point when I was no longer involved in the development of the RONI and I have no knowledge of any developments past this point.

The year 2010/11 continued to be difficult for the Local Authority and especially the Education Service. Savings were deemed a priority and grants for special work ceased, as did work on the National Strategies. Much of the work of Advisory staff in a Local Authority is to interpret National Strategy priorities and dictates and disseminate these to schools in a manageable way (Ball, Maguire & Braun, 2012, p.10). My role was classed as Advisory and it ceased to exist when I was made redundant in 2011. As a result, with the agreement of the CASE academic and non-

academic partners, this study became centred in one school within the Local Authority. This was the school which had run the pilot and which decided to remain involved with the study. Although I no longer worked for the Local Authority, I continued to visit the school once a week to conduct fieldwork under the terms of my ESRC CASE Studentship. At this time, it also became difficult for me to obtain access to managers and strategists within the Local Authority. I was no longer part of a meeting structure which would allow me insight into other aspects of education and the educational priorities of the Local Authority. This marked a pivotal moment of change in this research and ultimately determined how the research would develop.

### Collaborative work with the school and the RONI

One positive thing about the move to a focus on one school as the site of my research was that I was already acquainted with the school and with its Head of Careers Development through my work on the RONI pilot. However, as a researcher in an education setting it is important to be aware that schools' priorities change over time, influenced by central government, local authorities and senior managers, amongst others. One of the challenges that I faced was to remain flexible, positive and approachable throughout. Negotiating a mutually beneficial pathway for the study proved challenging. One way that I was able to move this collaborative work forward was by helping the school to devise a questionnaire to measure the ambitions and aims of the pupils, primarily to ascertain if the careers advice and programmes in the school were effective in promoting high aspirations. This work was carried out and subsequently formed part of this research (see Chapters 4 and 5). The school was interested in using the RONI to assist them in placing pupils in appropriate intervention programmes. At first the school decided to run the RONI to identify all the pupils at risk of becoming NEET in all year groups and arrange some interventions. In a packed timetable the interventions were to take place at lunchtimes and as such they were voluntary for both pupils and teachers. Each group was allocated a day and time in the Careers Library. The nature of the interventions was the responsibility of the teachers who volunteered; they had been recruited in meetings where the RONI had been discussed. The volunteers were therefore aware that these pupils had been identified as at high risk of becoming NEET. It is possible that this knowledge changed the teachers' behaviour towards these pupils, however,

it seems unlikely that this was to the detriment of these pupils as the teachers volunteered their time. In the sessions I observed, which were poorly attended by the pupils, the focus was on the use of the Careers Library and internet sites for both careers information and revision for examinations. One teacher used her art room for the session and was keen to use art to engage with these pupils, however, attendance was still poor and this initiative quickly fell by the wayside.

I maintained contact with the school and had meetings with the Head of Careers in which we discussed how to move the study forward. In September 2011 the Head of Careers was approached by several charitable organisations who offered programmes to re-engage disaffected young people. He negotiated with the Head Teacher to allocate one timetabled hour a week for two years in order for these charities to engage with the school. This meant that the pupils selected would not take part in Religious Education lessons. In all, 45 Year 10 pupils were identified by the RONI as at risk of becoming NEET. The Head of Careers then selected 18 of these pupils who he felt would benefit most from the types of interventions available through the charities. This is a major limitation of the integrity of the RONI tool and the subsequent intervention programme in that these were mediated through the subjective opinion of one person. The research could not from this point evaluate either the tool or the interventions. As the researcher I did not choose my participants or the interventions they would be subject to, therefore in consultation with my supervisors, I accepted that within these constraints my role was to protect the integrity and reliability of the study and to record the experiences of the young people, within the ethical framework outlined in Chapter 4, below.

As noted above, in 2008 this RONI was one of the first to be instigated; others followed. In 2012 Filmer-Sankey and McCrone conducted an evaluation of RONIs for NfER and concluded that then-current RONIs relied on information such as FSM and achievement data, and as such did not distinguish between different types of NEET (Filmer-Sankey & McCrone, 2012, p.11). They went on to recommend the development of a more robust tool for identifying these young people. They suggested that Local Authorities and schools needed to ensure local characteristics were taken into account; the nature of post-16 provision (is provision in one sixth form college or in every school or have schools formed a consortium?),

characteristics of schools (size, gender balance, etc.), and practical issues (e.g., transport issues, location of school, etc.). However, they conceded that whilst some of this information may be readily available (e.g., through National and school databases) other information may be more difficult and time-consuming to collect (Filmer-Sankey & McCrone, 2012, p.10).

## Summary

In this chapter I have given an account of how statistical information gathered on NEETs has informed this research. I have also explained how the RONI used in this study was developed, how it was influenced by pragmatic concerns of the school and the Local Authority and used by the Local Authority and the school which became central to the study. This chapter also serves to highlight how an emphasis on tackling NEETness and the risk of NEETness as associated with individuals' circumstances and personal traits has dominated Government policy and permeated into the approach taken by schools. Statistics-gathering and the emphasis on numbers of NEETs has led to a target-driven approach with an emphasis on preventing NEETness by identifying those at risk of becoming NEET from characteristics of those who became NEET and this principle informed the development of the RONI featured in this study. I have identified a number of issues that arise about the use and purpose of identifying (and tools to identify) young people at risk of NEET. These concerns include stereotyping and seeing young people as lacking aspiration; they are discussed in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

## Chapter 3 Theoretical perspective

### Introduction

In this chapter I explore Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). After I collected and started to analyse my data two prominent themes emerged: how the young people perceived their role in their future direction; and how their belief in themselves and the skills they had affect this perception. In my examination of theories that could help me explain and consider these elements Bandura's comprehensive theory came to the fore. It combines the environment, behaviour and the personal and thus gave me a vehicle to explore the data and the other pertinent debates surrounding the NEET discourse.

I have chosen to place this chapter here as it includes a full explanation of SCT and the wider pertinent literature within educational contexts and therefore constructs a bridge between the structural elements present in this debate as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 and the individual voices of the young people that follow in Chapters 5 and 6.

### The question of focus

Chapter 1 of this thesis highlights the problematic nature of the NEET issue. Stewart (2004), Simmons and Thompson (2011), Byrne (2005) and Schoon (2004) emphasise the labour and economic challenges that have impacted on youth transitions over the last 30 years. Many governments, whilst seemingly taking into account environmental factors, especially the inequality highlighted by the prevalence of NEET youth in underprivileged households and areas, have concentrated on instigating different policies to help young people through an emphasis on upskilling individuals, which included incentivising their attendance at training courses through Employment Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and similar schemes. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) contention that individualisation is now a strong factor in social constructs also illustrates the complexity of the experience of young people. These researchers and policy makers trying to find solutions to the 'NEET problem' do not ignore either structural or individual solutions. However, they normally invoke solutions and understanding of the

problem that tend more towards one perspective than the other. However, these perspectives may be better understood as complementary and reciprocal. For example, Coffey and Farrugia (2014, p.470) acknowledge that agency is “a generative process not located within the individual subject but comprised in intra-action with relations of force – the outcomes of which cannot be known in advance”.

One recent study conducted by Bell and Thurlby-Campbell (2017) addresses this issue by combining research within a theoretical framework which includes both individual agency and structure. They employ Bandura’s theory of direct personal agency (Bandura, 2001b) and Lopez and Scott’s (2000) typology of institutional and relational structure. They adopt a practical approach to identifying both elements within a qualitative research study of 16 young people who are NEET. The young people’s experiences are examined over time for direct personal agency and how structural factors have a direct effect on these individuals. They conclude that young people cannot be held wholly responsible for how they apply their direct personal agency, rather, others (near and far) influence the conditions in which they are able to exercise any direct agency (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell, 2017, p.179). This research gives insight into conducting research about NEET young people in an innovative way. I investigated Bandura’s theories to explore if I could use them to understand my data. This chapter gives an account of the theories and how they are relevant and useful for my study.

### Introduction: Why Social Cognitive Theory?

I have found that Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) has helped me to answer my research question: How do pupils of a secondary school in an inner-city Local Authority with a large number of NEETs, perceive their experience of school and their aspirations in relation to their future prospects for education, work and life? SCT has emerged as an appropriate theoretical lens through which to view my data since elements of self-efficacy and agency emerged as strong themes in my initial thematic data analysis (see Chapter 5). This led me to examine SCT as a theoretical perspective that might help me to understand why this is the case.

SCT is a complex theory with many elements that has been used in many disciplines, including: therapy (Bandura, 1997); mass media (Bandura, 2001a); public health

(Bandura, 1998); education (Usher & Pajares, 2006); and marketing (Wang & Netemeyer, 2002). Much of this work has focused on self-efficacy and agency and how these aspects can be enhanced or changed to benefit the individual. I believe that SCT can also shed light on how ineffective agency and low self-efficacy may manifest in an individual and what wider societal factors may have contributed to this situation. In the following sections I will explore SCT in some depth to support this point.

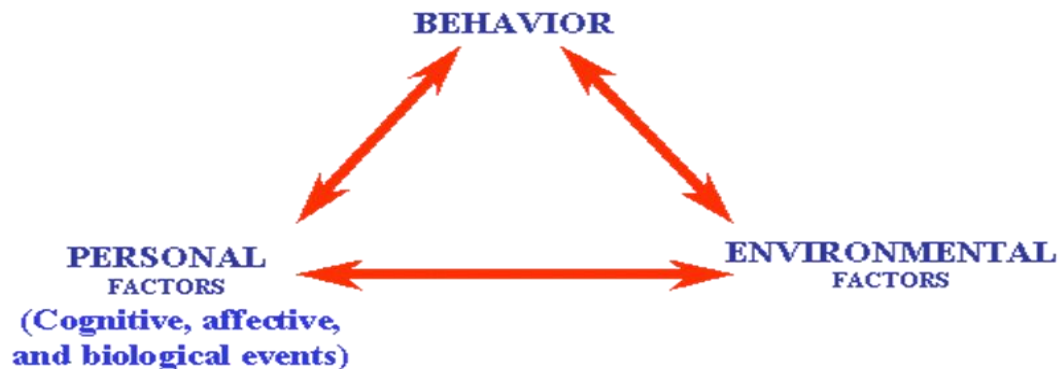
Firstly, I will give a brief overview of SCT and discuss how self-efficacy and agency arise from and are influenced by the environment, behaviour and personal factors in the Triadic Reciprocal Determinism (TRD) relationship (Bandura, 1986; Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994). I will describe agency and self-efficacy and explain how these concepts will help me to understand the experiences of the young people. I will also present Pajares and Usher's (2008) development of Bandura's SCT as a theoretical perspective that can help me explore individuals' experience and aspirations in an educational setting. I will introduce my own adaptations of the TRD model. These models serve to illustrate, explore and challenge the notion that NEETness arises from an individual's abilities and attitudes and can be 'cured', rather than seeing NEETness as a construct of a combination of elements which operate within the wider social, cultural and economic environment.

What are the key features of Social Cognitive Theory that I believe are relevant to my study?

SCT is principally a theory of how social structures are created by human activity in order to organise, guide, and regulate human affairs (Giddens, 1984, p.278). Bandura (1986), in *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* emphasises that SCT explains how humans adapt and change through a cognitive, vicarious, self-regulatory, and self-reflective process. The key features of SCT relevant to my study are: triadic reciprocal determinism; agency; and self-efficacy. These are explored in the following sections.

### Triadic reciprocal determinism

The basis of SCT is that people are proactive within their environments. They are able to organise, reflect on and regulate their behaviour and this results in an interplay between (a) personal factors in the form of cognition, affect, and biological events, (b) behaviour, and (c) environmental influences. Bandura (1986, p.27) calls this three-way interaction “triadic reciprocal determinism” (TRD).



*Figure 2. Bandura's model of triadic reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986, p.29)*

Environmental factors include those things which are outside of the person. These factors can offer opportunities and support but also social pressure. They can be physical, for example, the size of a classroom or the weather, or social, for example, family, friends and colleagues (Bandura, 1986). Personal factors include tangible factors such as demographics, e.g., age, gender, etc., and less tangible factors such as thoughts, feelings and self-belief. Behavioural factors refer to the actions of the individual. SCT thus allows me to explore the wider societal issues that permeate debates on NEETness as well as individual factors. Next, I will explore how two key features of SCT, agency and self-efficacy, may help me to understand young people's experiences and how they articulate those experiences.

### Agency

Pajares (1996a, p.545) affirms that “How individuals interpret the results of their performance attainments informs and alters their environments and their self-beliefs, which in turn inform and alter their subsequent performances”. Thus, SCT is rooted in a view of human agency in which individuals are agents proactively engaged in their own development and can make things happen by their actions. Human agency



is the human capability to exert influence over one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions (Bandura, 2008). He states that "Through cognitive self-guidance, humans can visualize futures that act on the present; construct, evaluate, and modify alternative courses of action" (Bandura, 2006a, p.164) and "To be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances" (Bandura, 2008, p.16). There are four proponents of agency as described by Bandura (2006a, pp.164-165): forethought; intentionality; self-reactiveness; and self-reflection.

Forethought is the ability to motivate ourselves and influence our actions in a proactive way and it is developed by learning from consequences, the relationship between actions and outcomes. This skill relies on accurate processing of outcome information and involves "the temporal extension of agency" (Bandura 2006a, p.165) by setting goals and anticipating future events. People set goals for themselves and anticipate likely outcomes of actions to guide and motivate their efforts. When projected over a long-term course on matters of value, a forethoughtful perspective provides direction, coherence, and meaning to one's life (Bandura 1997).

Intentionality deals with the forming of intentions that "include action plans and strategies for realizing them" (Bandura, 2006a, p.164). Self-reactiveness extends the character of the agent to be more than just a "planner and fore thinker" (Bandura, 2006a, p.165) and includes practices of self-management, self-motivation and self-regulation. Lastly, self-reflection is self-examination. As stated by Bandura, it is characterised by self-awareness, by reflecting on personal efficacy, how sound one's thoughts and actions are, the meaning of one's pursuits, and (if necessary) changing existing life course patterns (Bandura, 2006a, p.165).

I have found that these four components were demonstrated by some of the young people as they described their experiences to me, as I show in Chapter 6. For others these were developing skills. This is especially pertinent to my study as it is mastery of these proponents that leads to effective human agency which Bandura (1997) maintains is applied through three different forms: personal; proxy; and collective.

Personal agency is applied individually and is the means by which an individual affects what she can control directly, although he acknowledges that direct influence is not always possible. The exercise of agency through proxy is the indirect influence a person can benefit from when situations are outside of their direct control. In many situations people do not have direct control, and use others who have resources, knowledge, and the means to achieve the preferred outcome, to act on their behalf. For example, children may work through their parents to get what they want, employees through organised unions, and the general public through their elected representatives (Bandura, 2001b, p.11). So, on the one hand, as Bandura argues, good capabilities and therefore personal resources:

enable people to serve as causal contributors to their own life course by selecting, influencing, and constructing their own circumstances. With such skills, people are better able to provide supports and direction for their actions, to capitalize on planned or fortuitous opportunities, to resist social traps that lead down detrimental paths, and to disengage themselves from such predicaments should they become enmeshed in them.

(Bandura, 1989, p.8)

However, this does not negate the influence of environments and social systems. SCT states that while socio-economic status, family and educational structures and economic conditions may not affect human behaviour directly, they all “influence people’s aspirations, self-efficacy beliefs, personal standards, emotional states, and other self-regulatory influences” (Bandura, 1989, p.9). Accordingly, “In the social cognitive theory of self and society personal agency and social structure operate interdependently rather than as disembodied entities” (Bandura, 1986; 2001). Personal agency thus operates within a broad network of socio-structural influences. In these agentic transactions, “people are producers as well as products of social systems” (Bandura 1986, p.278). It is this connection between the personal and the wider aspects that will feature in my analysis of my data in Chapter 6.

Human development is not just about the acquisition of knowledge in a vacuum, rather it may be seen as a journey that is influenced by life events which vary in their effect. Life events are often tied into milestones which are often related to age, for example, in England, GCSE examinations are normally taken at 16. Life events can

also be unpredictable and catastrophic; ill health, disability, divorce, redundancy, may all impact on a person's journey through life, alongside societal changes, for example, economic upturns and downturns, or the rise of social media as a communication tool. It is also the case that change may have a lesser or greater impact at different stages of one's life. For example, youth unemployment is reported to have a long term 'scarring' effect in that life-term earnings are diminished (Gregg & Tominey, 2005). There can also be fortuitous encounters which lead to unexpected pathways, although personal and social factors still play a part in a person's ability or readiness to take advantage of these. Key to this sense of agency is the fact that, among other personal factors, individuals possess self-beliefs that enable them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions, so that "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (Bandura, 1986, p.250).

Why is agency important in my study?

Bandura (1999, p.21) states that "any theory void of this agentic perspective strip(s) people of the very capabilities that make them unique in their power to shape their environment and their own destiny". Bandura presents a theory of social cognitive functioning based on three types of human agency: direct personal agency; proxy agency; and collective agency. These interconnected agencies shape not only the self-view and efficacy of a person, but also the person's identity and place within a society where "people are producers as well as products of social systems" (Bandura, 2001b, p.1). Direct personal agency includes individuals' power and ability to function as "self-organizing, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulative mechanisms" (Bandura, 1999, p.21).

Agency and adolescence

In adolescence these mechanisms are developing skills and many adolescents still rely on proxy agents. Proxy agency uses others to attain a goal or to work as intermediaries to accomplish tasks, for example, parents may be proxy agents. Teachers can act as proxy agents as well, pupils use teachers' knowledge and their ability to share that knowledge to pass examinations. Collective agency is based upon "shared beliefs of efficacy, pooled understandings, group aspirations and

incentive systems” (Bandura, 1999, p.21). The three different types of agency have a complex relationship; in an ideal situation they may work together towards a desired approved outcome.

### Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined as “People’s judgment of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not with the skills one has but with judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses” (Bandura, 1986, p.391).

Individuals form their self-efficacy from four related sources: mastery experience - how one interprets past experience; vicarious experience - the observation of others performing similar tasks, these may be people that are admired by an individual; social persuasions - the constructive encouragement or otherwise received from others; or physical and emotional states of the person - these influence one’s ability in that positive mood may raise self-efficacy, while negativity and depression may lower self-efficacy. Information is gathered from these sources and interpreted and thus a judgement is made of self-efficacy (Bandura 1986).

My study involves the experiences and aspirations of young people at a crucial time in their lives in which they are beginning to make choices that will influence their future careers and pathways. They are deciding what courses to take, what careers they might follow, whether they want to go to university. Their levels of self-efficacy have an impact on their development of direct personal agency, therefore how they acquire any self-efficacy is of interest.

Babies and young children develop their sense of self and self-efficacy within their family environment. Their competencies and language accumulation are influenced by their interaction with parents or other carers. This extends to siblings and other family members as the child matures. Peers play an important role in developing self-knowledge of one’s capabilities (Bandura, 1989).

### School and its effects on self-efficacy

School is where knowledge and cognition competencies are developed and where they are tested, validated, and compared. As children progress through school they develop a notion of their intelligence through the failures and successes that they have. Teachers and school and their creation of learning environments can influence how self-efficacy develops within a child. Teachers' beliefs and how they motivate students can impact on how students regard themselves (Bandura, 1989). As my research involves young people in school this element of self-efficacy and its presence in my data will be discussed in Chapter 6.

### Adolescence and self-efficacy

Adolescence is often considered to be a troubling period of development. There are many things to be negotiated and thought about, including puberty, sexuality, emerging adult responsibilities and the task of choosing one's career path. Pressures around these can result in risky behaviours, the level of which may be affected by personal characteristics, environmental influences and the individual's degree of self-management. Social circumstances can be a deciding factor in whether adolescents emerge from these times without irreversibly closing down potentially beneficial life chances. Youngsters who enter adolescence with a strong sense of self-efficacy can lessen the impact of, or make the most of this transition, while those with a lower sense of self-efficacy can become vulnerable to distress from emerging new environments (Bandura, 1989). Risky behaviours and their relationship with self-efficacy are evident in my findings and will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Self-efficacy is about people's beliefs in themselves to perform tasks. It can determine how people feel, think, and behave. If a person has a high sense of self-efficacy they will set goals, take calculated risks, keep going and believe they are in charge of their own destiny. Those with low self-efficacy avoid tasks that they find difficult, fear failure and have low levels of commitment. Self-efficacy can be a difficult concept to appreciate as the same level may not apply to all tasks and all life's experiences. There are, as noted previously, four main sources of influence that contribute to a person's self-efficacy. The first is mastery: this is also referred to as performance outcomes: if a person experiences success they are more likely to want

to build on this, whereas failure, especially early on, can weaken a sense of efficacy. If early success is very easy and unchallenging, then when things become more difficult the person may not have the skills to persevere (Bandura 1986).

The second way of creating self-belief and efficacy is through vicarious experiences. That is, observing people like oneself, who one feels have the same outlook, are the same perhaps in appearance and gender, and who succeed in achieving a task. This helps to establish that one could also achieve a similar task. These people model what success looks like.

The third way is social persuasion, which may take the form of verbal praise, however, social persuasion may also be exercised through written feedback or increasingly by computer technologies and social media. When people are informed that they are good at something, this may strengthen their belief that they can achieve the task in hand. This works more effectively if the persuasion is true and positive. Negative persuasion may undermine blossoming self-belief, whereas positive persuasion cannot override reality. Using praise and positive reinforcement can be most effective if it is used to build on people's success and tasks are presented in a well-managed measured way (Bandura 1986). Lastly self-efficacy is affected by emotional states. Being positive and in a good mood helps people feel that they are able to perform. For those with high self-efficacy they are more able to harness their stress and make it work for them. Those with low self-efficacy feel vulnerable when stressed and therefore find stress debilitating. This has been demonstrated in research about anxiety and mathematics (Bandalos, Yates & Thorndike-Christ, 1995). These component parts of self-efficacy are used to shed light on my data in Chapter 6.

How does self-efficacy affect human functioning?

Self-efficacy affects human functioning through cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection processes, as follows.

Cognitive processes

Cognitive processes are influenced by self-efficacy. Humans are purposeful and therefore we use forethought to move forward and achieve goals. These goals are influenced by self-efficacy, as those with higher self-efficacy will set more

challenging goals. They will also, despite setbacks, be more resilient and will be more able to achieve their goals. Those with lower self-efficacy may, when things become difficult, develop self-doubt and make poor judgements and become less able to think analytically (Bandura, 1993, p.118).

### Motivational processes

Self-efficacy beliefs contribute to motivational processes by their influence on the type of goals people set, the effort they put in to achieve their goals, and how, when faced with difficulties, they overcome these (Bandura, 1993, p.128).

### Affective processes

If a person believes they have good coping strategies, then that can lead to less stress and anxiety. People who believe they are less able may allow their thoughts to become negative and then catastrophise (Bandura, 1993, p.132).

### Selection processes

Self-efficacy is also a product of the environment people reside within. People choose goals, interests, situations which they believe will afford them the best chance of success. This is then validated by continuing competency and thus becomes self-fulfilling. People may avoid tasks and situations that they feel unsure of or are challenged by (Bandura, 1993, p.135). I would add that there are times in our lives when tasks or activities become more prominent than we would have liked. For example, the rise in information technology (IT) has led to many people finding that IT is a growing aspect of their work which they were not expecting. In schools the curriculum is decided for pupils, as are the teaching/learning strategies employed. A pupil has very little say in what they can study, for how long, in what way. They discover the subjects they believe they are good at and may make further choices based on these. Their perceived subject and career choices and development can affect their subsequent life choices. Bandura argues that:

The stronger people's belief in their efficacy, the more career options they consider possible, the greater the interest they show in them, the better they prepare themselves educationally for different occupations, and the greater their staying power and success in difficult occupational pursuits.

(Bandura, 1993, p.135)

SCT thus presents a holistic theoretical perspective that I can utilise to investigate the connection between the wider aspects of society, policies, economic ideologies, highlighted in Chapters 1 and 2 and to explore why these may affect young people's experiences. It also allows me to drill down to analyse the voices of the young people: what they say; what this may indicate; and what, if any, are the differences between groups.

### Critiques of SCT

I use SCT extensively throughout my discussion, however, one of the main criticisms of SCT is that it is not a cohesive theory and it is not organised systematically (Tadayon Nabavi, 2012). This means that the diverse facets of the theory may not be connected. For example, researchers currently cannot find a connection between observational learning and self-efficacy within the social-cognitive perspective. Furthermore, the theory is so broad that not all of its component parts are fully understood and integrated into a single explanation of learning and personality. Some of the criticisms are that: the over-emphasis on learned behaviour from observation and modelling ignore biological and hormonal differences and maturity; self-efficacy is used and explored independently of the broader more complex structures of social cognitive theory. Furthermore, SCT posits that an interconnection between environment and behaviour leads to change, whereas it is sometimes argued that behaviour is more consistent and does not change, regardless of situation. It is also argued that SCT ignores individuals' innate ability to acquire skills or any learning difficulties that make these skills more difficult to master. In 1960 it was concluded that children who watched violent acts would repeat these acts (Tadayon Nabavi, 2012). This conclusion has remained controversial and has led to some scepticism regarding the notion of observed learning.

While I accept these criticisms, I believe that SCT does provide an appropriate theoretical lens for this research for the following reasons. It allows me to consider: the outside influences on the young people in my study and how these elements may affect their perception of their experience; the young people's perception and



articulation of ‘self’ expressed in terms of ambition, portrayal, reflection and judgement; how direct personal agency and self-efficacy form part of their overall perception of their experience of school. Furthermore, I am interested in why this may have occurred, and SCT offers a vehicle to explore this through an exploration of agency.

I will now turn my attention to triadic reciprocal determinism, self-efficacy and agency in more depth to show why SCT may be a suitable vehicle for my broader discussions and research with regard to NEETness and why it may serve to illuminate my thematic analysis of my qualitative data. Firstly, I will briefly discuss other theories that I considered and rejected.

I considered using Bourdieu’s theory of habitus to explore the experiences of the young people in my study (Bourdieu, 1984). However, it would have proved difficult within the restraints of the research and the site of the study to fully examine the cultural capital of the young people and how this might affect their experience. I also considered using Foucault’s theories of power and knowledge as a theoretical base for exploring their relationship with school (Foucault, 1980). As I have indicated, social justice was a concern and I also considered the work of Nancy Fraser, as her work on neoliberalism is of interest since neoliberalism forms part of the environmental structures that have been explored earlier in this thesis (Fraser, 2013). However, I did not believe that any of the above allowed for the combination of the structural and individual elements of the NEET debate, whereas SCT encompasses the structural elements and the personal elements of this complex debate surrounding the concept of NEET.

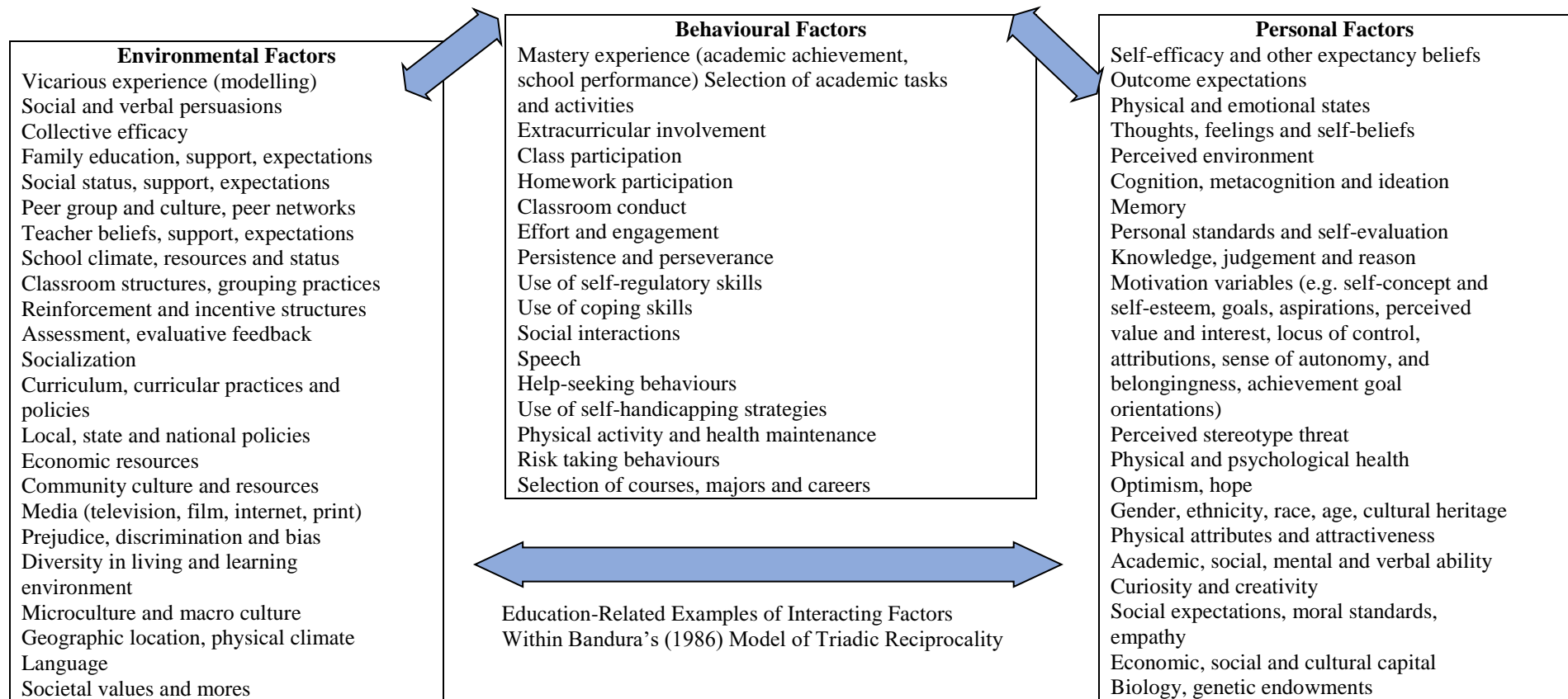
### Adaptations of SCT that are relevant to my analysis

As has been noted above, SCT has been used in various contexts. I will examine Pajares and Usher’s (2008) adaptation of SCT, in relation to educational settings as this is pertinent to my own study, and also social cognitive career theory (SCCT), as adapted by Lent, Brown and Hackett (1994), which is relevant as I am concerned with the aspirations of young people aged 13 to 16 who are on the brink of adult life. This section also serves as a brief literature review of research on the use of SCT and elements within it to analyse young people’s experiences and their relationship to

triadic reciprocal determinism (TRD) and how in turn these connections affect their self-efficacy and agency.

#### Pajares and Usher's use of triadic reciprocal determinism

Pajares and Usher (2008) present an insightful examination of TRD playing out in the success or otherwise of students in educational settings. They contend that while self-efficacy has been shown as a predictor of academic success, researchers have not sufficiently explored the relationship between environment, behaviour and personal factors. As we have seen, these are the elements of TRD which are the cornerstone of Bandura's overarching SCT. As illustrated below (Figure 3), Pajares and Usher (2008) have developed a model that indicates how education success or otherwise is the result of factors interacting in a relationship of TRD.



*Figure 3. Education-related examples of interacting factors within Bandura's (1986) model of triadic reciprocity (Pajares & Usher, 2008,p.401)*

Bandura's model of triadic reciprocal determinism states that the development of human capabilities in which self-efficacy and agent are paramount is a reciprocal relationship between behaviour, environment, and personal factors. Pajares and Usher (2008) have considered how research has confirmed these associations. However, the research does not indicate a causal link. My exploration of this model serves to explore this connection in educational and school settings, which will support me in analysing the voices of the young people featured in this research, as they describe their experience and aspirations.

Pajares presents evidence from various research (e.g., Multon, Brown & Lent, 1991; Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998) exploring behavioural factors, including participation in class, completion of homework, effort, choice of course, etc., and the influence these have on the self-efficacy of an individual. Pajares and Usher (2008, p.391) concludes that "academic self-efficacy *is* correlated with in-class seatwork and homework, exams and quizzes, and essays and reports". Furthermore, Pintrich and De Groot (1990) suggest that self-efficacy facilitates cognitive engagement such that raising self-efficacy likely leads to higher achievement by increasing use of cognitive strategies. Other researchers, notably Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons (1992) have investigated the effect of behavioural factors on self-efficacy beliefs. Bandura and Schunk (1981) conclude that learning goals that are SMART, i.e., specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and timebound, are far more effective than long-term goal-setting. In addition to this, studies carried out by Locke and Latham (2002) demonstrate a link between setting short-term goals and skill development and that realising these goals demonstrates an increase in mastery (Pajares & Usher, 2008, p.403).

Pajares and Usher (2008) explore the environment factors that are part of this development. Environment factors include classroom organisation, teachers, parents, school policies and wider social models. Social messages from family, social environments, peer groups and school can influence how young people judge their success. For example, research has shown that children's self-efficacy is affected by parental support, encouragement, and aspirations for their children and that they do not uniformly respond to the same messages in the same way (see e.g., Caprara, Regalia, Scabini, Barbaranelli & Bandura, 2004; Caprara, Scabini & Sgritta, 2003).

Bandura's (1997) claim that individuals' self-efficacy beliefs are more easily maintained if others voice belief in them is given credence from qualitative research. For example, Zeldin and Pajares (2000) found that influential messages sent to women who pursued careers in mathematics, science and technology, reinforced their confidence in their own skills and enabled them to follow what may be considered to be male-dominated careers. Some researchers have concluded that African-American students' beliefs about themselves and about their capabilities and achievements have been influenced more by local and interpersonal persuasion than by the negative messages received from the wider society. Furthermore, initial findings suggest that African-American students pay more attention to direct social persuasions than do their White counterparts (Usher & Pajares, 2006). Students are also influenced by situational variables, for example, comments from others and social comparisons, as to how well they are learning (Schunk, 1995).

In Bandura's (1986) system of TRD, if environmental factors or barriers such as discrimination or social structures prevent people from exercising control over the outcomes of their lives, their motivation and behaviour will be affected. However, if the environment is open and lets people realise their capabilities without limitation, the role of self-efficacy is high. Thus, the environment, connected with other factors, can work to encourage the development of self-efficacy or destroy or undermine fragile self-efficacy. In addition, students who have low self-efficacy lose faith when faced with environmental difficulties and often fail to take advantage of opportunities, whilst those with strong self-efficacy overcome obstacles sometimes by changing the instructional environment alone or with others (Bandura, 1997).

In the TRD model personal factors which influence and are influenced by environment and behavior include such things as status, gender, race, age and other factors that are acquired, such as verbal ability, cultural capital, emotional states and cognition. Personal factors also include an individual's personal and unique goals, ambitions, values, interests, attributions, sense of independence and belonging, achievement and motivation variables, such as self-concept and self-esteem.

Research has explored the links between self-efficacy and other personal factors in human functioning. Many studies validate the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and other motivational structures and academic self-beliefs (Pajares, 1996a; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). Positive self-efficacy typically correlates with holding an interest in school and academic subjects, a goal-orientated mindset and being a self-regulated learner. However, negative self-efficacy is often associated with anxiety related to mathematics, writing, computer science, and academic work in general (Klassen, 2004; Usher & Pajares, 2006; Pajares, 1996a; Pajares & Schunk, 2005). This is not surprising, given that one of the four components of self-efficacy, as mentioned above, is the physical and emotional state of the student. It has also been found that students who interpret this anxiety as an indicator that they cannot perform the task lowered their efficacy, whereas the efficacy of others, who see their anxiety as a temporary state, remains unaltered (Usher & Pajares, 2006).

Self-efficacy can also be affected by the response of the social environment to purely physical characteristics such as gender, race and ethnicity, and age (Bandura, 2008). Gender differences can arise as a function of home, cultural, educational, and mass media influences. There has been research into gender and self-belief, for example, it seems that boys are more 'self-congratulatory' and girls more modest, so their self-belief and confidence may not reflect their actual skills (Wigfield, Eccles & Pintrich, 1996). Also, Eisenberg, Martin and Fabes (1996) argue that gender orientation and stereotypical views of gender may be responsible for gender differences in academic self-efficacy. In addition, Eccles (1987) argues that educational and occupational choice are partly due to students' stereotypical views, confidence and the value placed on different activities and tasks. Also, researchers have concluded that girls think they are less competent than boys if the task is deemed masculine (Meece, 1991). Boys and girls, when young, report the same confidence in their mathematical ability but this changes as they get older and girls feel less confident and underestimate their ability (Midgley, Feldlaufer & Eccles, 1989). Pajares (1996b) offers a review of findings on gender differences in mathematics self-efficacy. Even gifted girls are likely to be under-confident (Pajares, 1996b).

### Social cognitive career theory

As will be discussed in Chapter 5, my adoption of an SCT theoretical framework emerged from my thematic examination of my data. As my research questions relate to young people's experience of school and encompass their future career ambitions it would be remiss if I did not acknowledge a developing strand of social cognitive theory which focuses on career choice. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) has been developed by Lent et al. (1994) and focusses on self-efficacy, goal-setting and outcomes. As illustrated by Figure 4, below, SCCT acknowledges the influence of the environment and behaviour and thus follows the TRD model.

SCCT offers a theoretical structure for connecting vocational interest and decision-making processes. It is argued that personal factors, for example, gender, race and the situated social background, are factors in career-related learning experiences (Lent et al., 1994). Level of self-efficacy and expectations are linked to learning experiences and fundamental to forming interests, i.e., if one is good at something one pursues it, this and subsequent goal setting and actions can lead to decisions with regard to one's career. Thus, SCCT is a development of TRD in that it focuses on the reciprocity and interactions between individuals' cognitive processes and their environment (Lent et al., 1994). This connection has been confirmed by Fouad and Smith (1996), and Lent, Brown, Schmidt, Brenner, Lyons, and Treistman (2003), who have shown the connections between self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations, with regard to the type of job and career considered by an individual. SCCT was also used by Williams and Subich (2006) who have sought to clarify gender differences in career-related learning experiences, whilst Navarro, Flores and Worthington (2007) focus on the effect of race/ethnicity and social class on specific types of learning experiences.

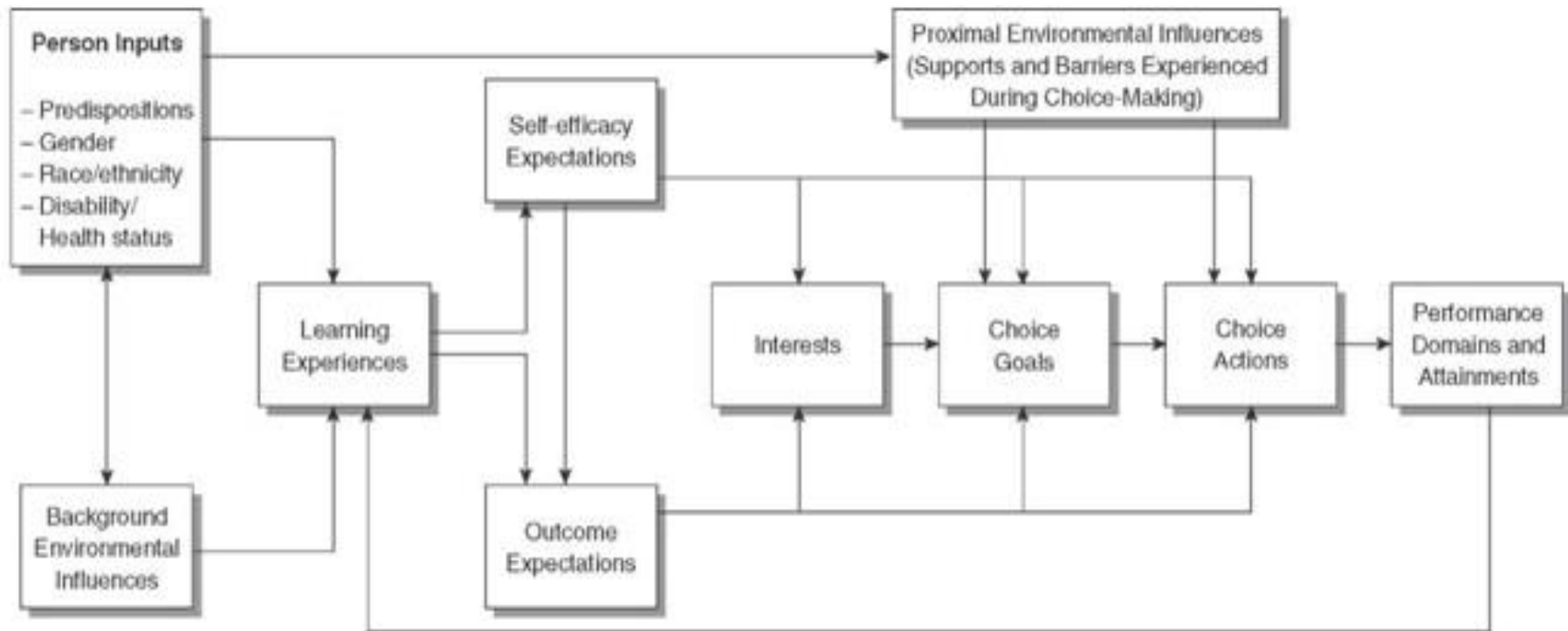


Figure 4. A simplified view of how career-related interests and choices develop (adapted from Lent et al, 1994).



I would argue that the focus within SCCT is primarily on the individual and their direct environment in a similar way to the Pajares and Usher 2008 model outlined above (Figure 3). I consider both theoretical viewpoints very useful applications of Bandura's (1986) original theory and use them in Chapters 5 and 6.

### My models and how I use them in my study

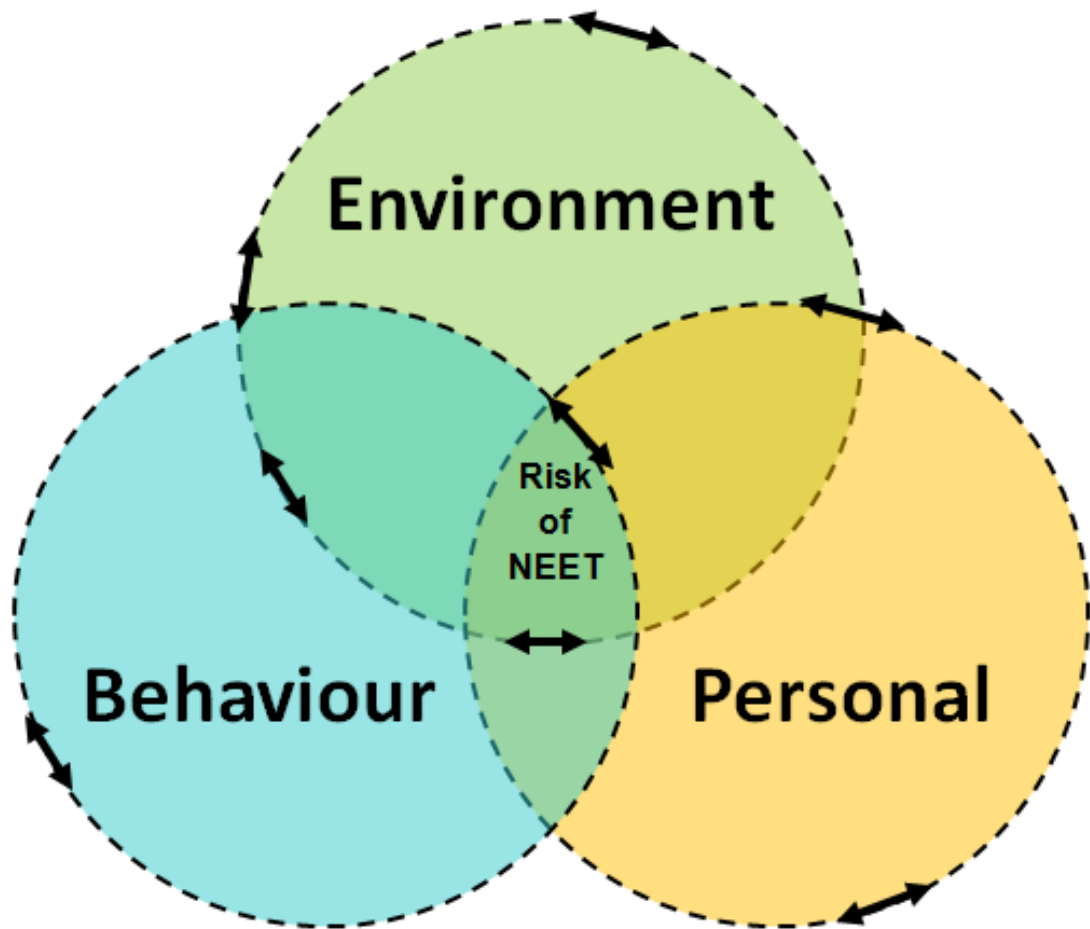
My first model (Figure 5) is an adaptation of Bandura's TRD model (1986). I have placed those at risk of becoming NEET in the middle. The circles, which overlap, and the arrows, indicate how young people, in this case, those at risk of becoming NEET, are part of a triadic reciprocal dynamic relationship. My model shows the reciprocal relationship between all three elements: their environment; their behaviour; and their personal traits. It shows that there is an ongoing, ever-changing, interactive relationship that influences what is captured in one moment in time, situated within the context of that time. The circles and arrows represent the continual movement of influences and reactions. I have then developed a second model (Figure 6) containing some broad and some more nuanced examples of each element in relation to the NEET discourse.

My second model incorporates elements from Pajares and Usher's (2008) model, and expands elements to explore the relationship between, environment, behaviour and personal traits, that play a part within the discourse of NEETness and those at risk of NEETness. In my model I have divided the influences into three categories macro (distant), meso (local) and micro (personal). These categories refer somewhat to the distance from an individual's influence, not the impact felt, so, for example within the environment section, macro elements could usefully be described as those of a structural nature, meso is an intermediary level of environmental conditions and micro an individual's own environment. I use these terms to illustrate the scale, but not necessarily the importance of these factors. I place elements like neoliberalism, national government policy and economic resources, in the macro section of environment. In 'behaviour', within the macro element, I have placed gathering statistics, curriculum decisions and the setting up of RONIs (see Chapter 2) thus illustrating the connection between an environmental aspect and a behavioural aspect, in that government targets are often the impetus for initiatives such as RONIs. I have drawn attention in earlier chapters to the debates surrounding the

construction of NEETness, and how this has been influenced by structural considerations; including government policies, changing labour patterns and educational reform.

My second model (termed 'Model 2'; see Figure 6) thus serves to explore and show how SCT and the triadic reciprocal determinism model can be used to explore the different levels of engagement with this issue and the impact that seemingly unconnected decisions have. In Chapter 6 I will discuss how they can affect the personal factors of young people and how directly and indirectly the experiences of the young people featured in this research, with particular attention to the development of self-efficacy and agency. It will also be used to discuss how people, in this case young people, engage with their environment and as such produce their environment, through their own agency and the agency of others.

Throughout, I am surmising the impact of and relationship between these elements, I can only explore the possibility, based on the evidence I present, that the elements in my diagram may influence self-efficacy and agency, not state definitively that they do so.



*Figure 5. A dynamic conceptualisation of Risk of NEET in terms of Bandura's TRD (my Model 1)*

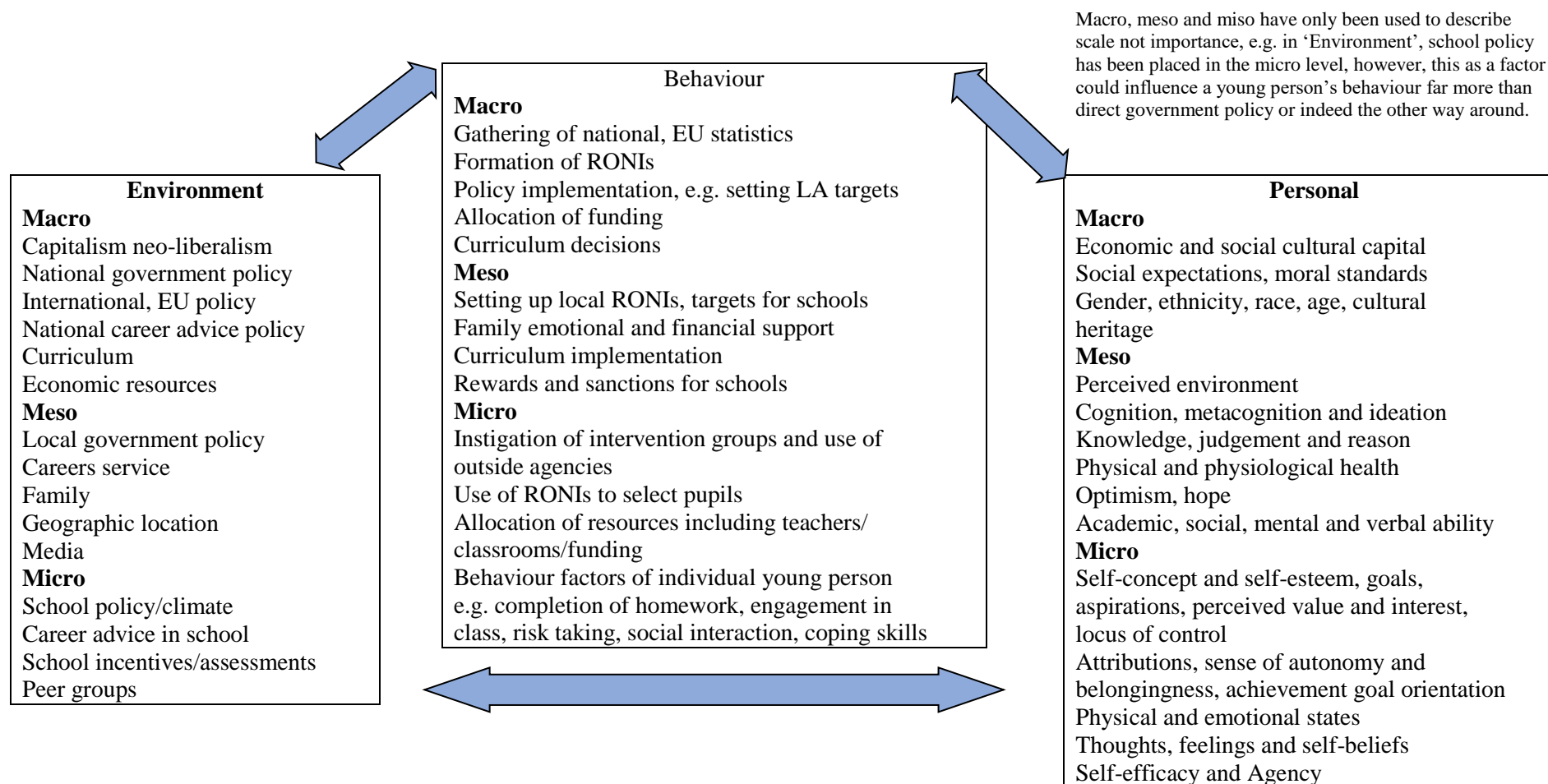


Figure 6. My Model 2 TRD and how it applies to the discourse of being NEET and being at risk of NEET

## Summary

In this chapter I have explored social cognitive theory in general with the emphasis on how I use SCT to explore the underpinning issues of the NEET debate. I have introduced triadic reciprocal determinism and illustrated, by using the model presented by Pajares and Usher (2008) (Figure 3, above), how this is appropriate for debates and considerations within an educational framework. I have adapted this model to explore the wider concepts of TRD in the NEET discourse (Figure 6) Furthermore, I have introduced social cognitive career theory (Figure 4). All of these models and adaptations of Bandura's theory and the research that underpins and validates them will be employed in Chapter 6, when I analyse the data gathered from the young people participating in this research. By paying attention to the levels of self-efficacy and agentic influences expressed by the young people, I will examine how these young people experience school in relation to their aspirations and future prospects for education, work and life.

## Chapter 4 Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter outlines my research design. In the first part I explore the theoretical basis for my choices and discuss the case study paradigm. I then give a detailed account of my research questions, my sample and time frame. Following this, I discuss why certain methods were chosen and how they were administered and subsequently analysed.

### What is my World view?

All the things I have about me generate the knowledge that becomes my way of operating in the world. It is how I, as a person, apply this knowledge that impacts on how I behave and what I do. We generally do things as a result of how we see things or are motivated by things and because we are knowledgeable we can discuss these things, talk about them, talk through them (Radnor, 2002, p.21).

As previously discussed, my own experience of work, opportunities and gender stereotypes influence the way in which I see the world and my own and others' places within it. Here I discuss the ontological and epistemological positions that inform this research and are evident throughout. They form the basis of the project, its induction, its construction, its journey and its conclusion. An ontological position can be described as the position of the researcher in terms of their beliefs regarding the nature of being, reality and substance (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). It also concerns classification of categories such as NEET (Bell & Thurlby-Campbell 2017). These beliefs are often described as either objectivism or constructionism (the latter often also referred to also as constructivism) (Bryman, 2012, p.33). The first purports that society exists independently of social actors, where the researcher can test and measure the reality of a situation because only one reality exists. By contrast, constructionism, "is the view that all knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

This research involved a sample of 285 pupils selected by the school that was at the centre of my study. As mentioned above, I was not involved in the selection of the young people who became my research participants. A wholly quantitative approach or a wholly qualitative approach would not have been sufficient or adequate to answer my research questions. A blend of different methods within a case study methodology was chosen to allow an iterative approach to be used to gain insight and draw conclusions. My position is one of constructionism in that I see the young people in this study as creating meaning through their experience and interactions with others. Through observing, examining and interpreting this interaction and from focus group discussions I can employ an interpretive process to find new knowledge. I also contend that qualitative data can be examined in a constructionist paradigm as a participant's interpretation of, and expectations of, their life choices is a result of their experiences to date.

This study involves an exploration of the aims, attitudes, ambitions and experiences of young people aged between 13 and 17 over the course of the study who may or may not have been identified as at risk of becoming NEET. It captures the voice and experiences of these young people as they move towards adulthood. An ontology where the assumption is made that young people do not contribute to the meaning and construction of the knowledge of their lives could not achieve this. The assumption would be that an observation of 'facts' would be sufficient to examine the phenomenon of NEETness and therefore understand it. It would also assume that the phenomenon of NEETness is not a social construct that has developed over time (as discussed in Chapter 1). A constructionist perspective, however, allows the following issues to be considered: the term NEET, its origins, how it has been conceptualized and used in academic literature, in the media, in policy documents and politicians' speeches, for what and for whose purposes; how changes to the education system may have helped or hindered some young people at risk of becoming NEET; whether a move away from a collective approach towards a greater emphasis on individuality has played a part in how some young people react to failure or aspire to be successful; and the features of young people's experiences of school in relation to their aspirations and future prospects for education, work and life.

Epistemology sits alongside ontology and is concerned with the nature of knowledge (Hamlyn, 1995). As Crotty notes, ontological and epistemological issues tend to merge together (Crotty, 1998). Epistemological considerations broadly fall into two positions: positivism; and interpretivism. Positivism is the idea that knowledge can be arrived at by gathering facts scientifically, objectively and explaining the results. Interpretivism on the other hand is characterized by a need to create new knowledge by examining and understanding human actions. In this research, an interpretive approach is taken, such that an understanding of the context in which the research is conducted is critical to the interpretation of data gathered (Willis, 2007, p.4).

### Research design

These debates are addressed and data harvested through a case study approach. I consider this to be an appropriate methodology because my study provides a case that is unique and has the potential to shed light on important issues around a specified phenomenon: in this case NEETness (Stake, 1995). Case study methodology is defined by Yin (1984, p.23) as, “an enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used”. The case under investigation is the pupils within one cohort in one school. Case studies have been shown to be useful when studying education and provide a practical method to explore the how, what and why questions posed in research and therefore can include both quantitative and qualitative data (Merriam, 2007). Mixed methods design is referred to as pragmatic and my decision to use such a design was a pragmatic decision, influenced in part by the collaborative nature of this study. Mixed methods design, and implementation is usefully discussed by Johnson and Onweugbuzie (2004). Their model allows me to describe my choice of quantitative and qualitative data collection and the priority of one approach over another by the use of capital letters, and the sequence taken by the use of an arrow. Hence, my mixed method design is quan → QUAL in Johnson and Onweugbuzie’s terms.

Whilst discussing research design, it is important to acknowledge, especially within a collaborative study, that research is messy. As Sarsby notes:



every field situation is different and initial luck in meeting good informants, being in the right place at the right time and striking the right note in relationships may be just as important as skill in technique. Indeed, many successful episodes in the field do come about through good luck as much as through sophisticated planning, many unsuccessful episodes are due as much to bad luck as to bad judgement.

(Sarsby, 1984, p.96)

As outlined in the Introductory chapter, this research began as a study of nine schools and the interventions the Local Authority instigated as a result of identifying pupils at risk of becoming NEET through a local RONI tool. Following changes to my role within the organisation and subsequent redundancy, the research became focused on one school and the focus moved to the experiences and aspirations of the young people, hence the research design had to be adapted and this happened in a somewhat organic fashion as the study progressed.

The following two figures illustrate how the research design changed over time. In Figure 7 I have adapted a model devised by Thomas (2016) as a typology for conducting case studies, to explore my decision-making in the first instance. In Figure 8 I present a revised version of the model in Figure 7, taking account of changes in my research design. These figures are not intended to present a linear process, rather an explanation of how a Case Study framework has been developed during this research.

I have populated Figure 7 with my research questions and the methods chosen to explore these questions. Three elements remained the same throughout: my research was a local case, as I had extensive knowledge of the Local Authority, schools and young people; I was not intending to test theory, rather to build theory; and the study remained instrumental, as the research was carried out with a purpose in mind. The study remained diachronic, following the research participants over 4 years; these elements are highlighted in green in Figures 7 and 8.

In Figure 7 I have used yellow highlight to indicate the elements which were present in my first research design but not in the second.

As the research changed, the study became explanatory rather than evaluative. The methods used to gain insight into the study of NEETs also changed, with a greater emphasis placed on the young people's stories. In Figure 8 the revised typology is presented. Here I have used blue to indicate the elements that were present only in the second research design.

So, using Thomas's (2016) typology, my subject is the socially constructed phenomenon of NEETness. My study is a single case (the school) with nested elements (the different groups within the sample in the school). It is of interest instrumentally, containing exploratory elements, and the aim or object is to explain the experiences of the young people and their aspirations through an interpretive approach and theory building, illuminated by insights from SCT.

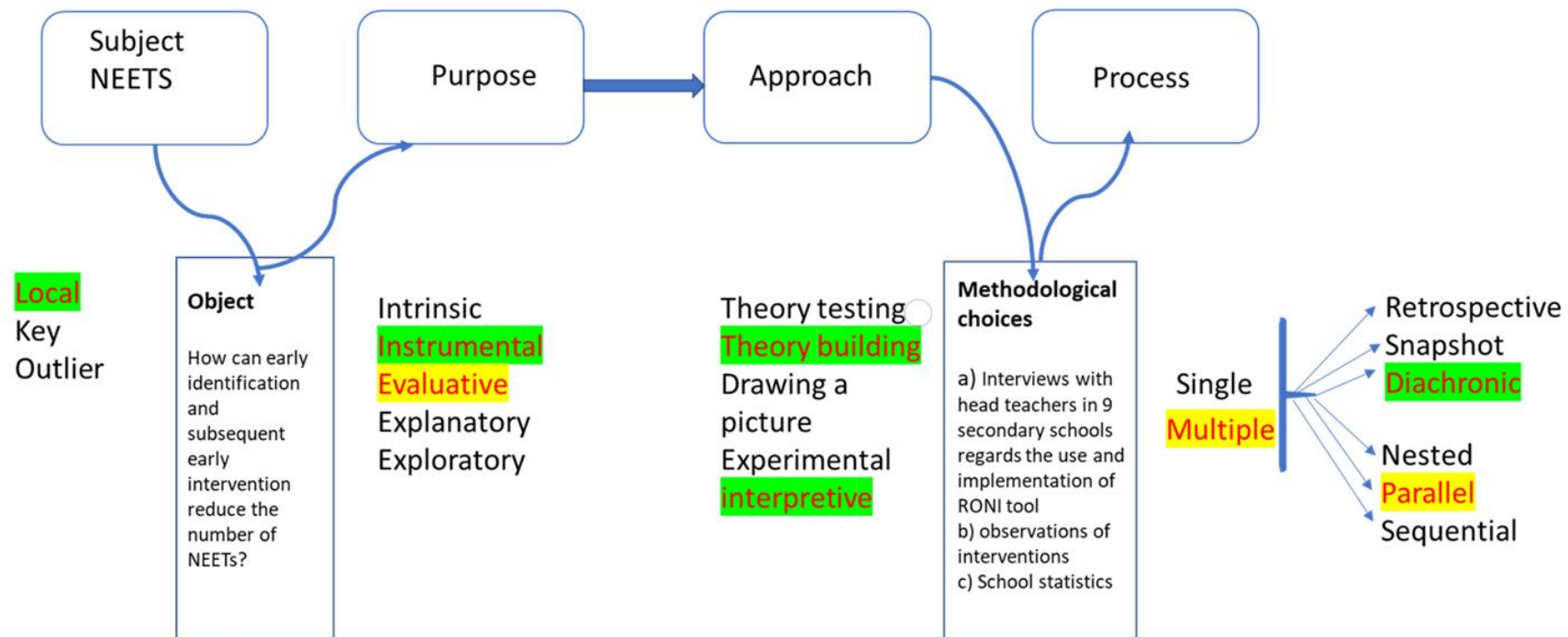


Figure 7. First model of case study research design (Thomas, 2016, p.116).

# Adapted model of case study research design

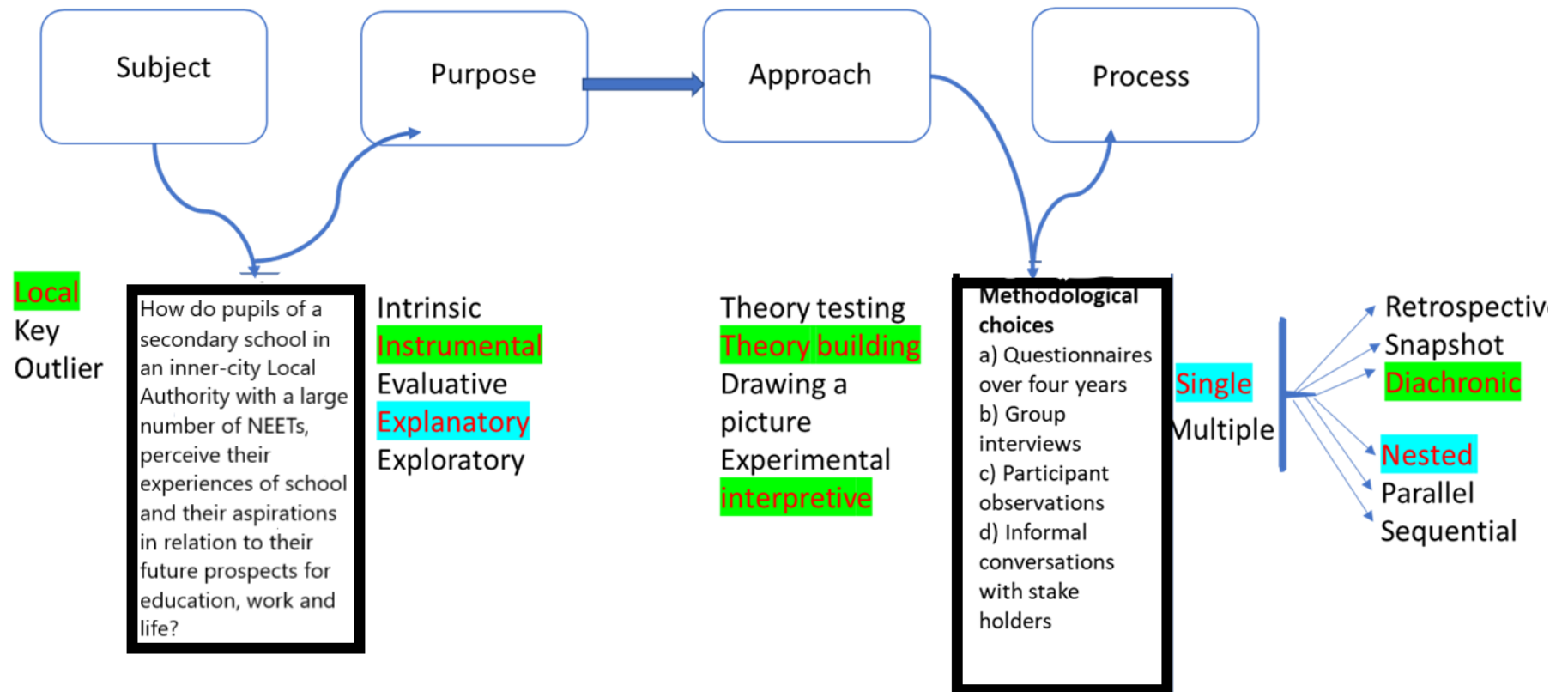
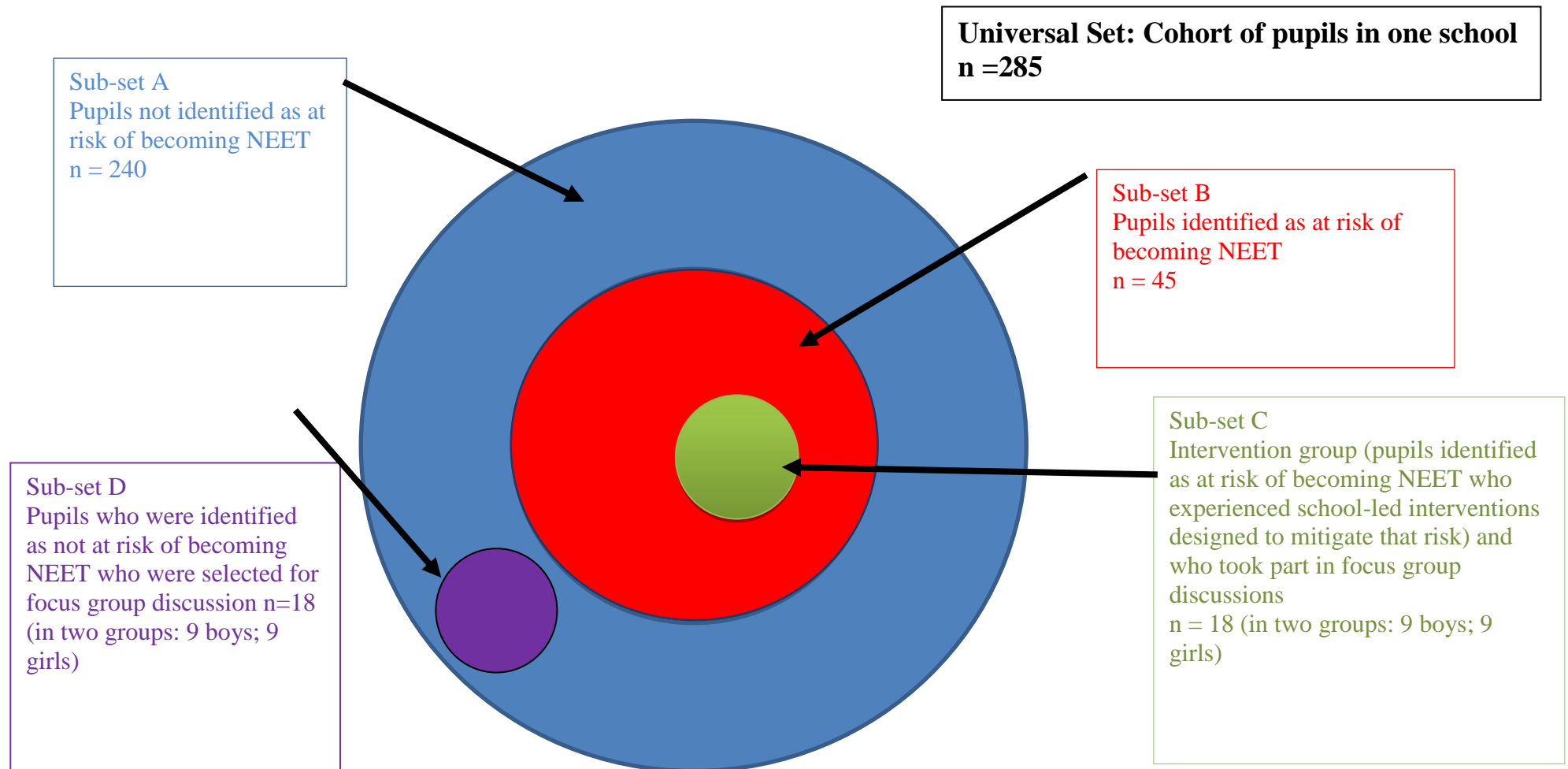


Figure 8. Second model of case study research design (Thomas, 2016, p.116)

### The sample

The sample consists of 285 young people in full-time education from one cohort in one school in a Local Authority in a large city in England, some of whom are deemed by the school to be at risk of becoming NEET ( $n = 45$ ) and others who are deemed by the school to be not at risk of becoming NEET ( $n = 240$ ). The young people were aged 13 to 14 in Year 9 at the outset of the study in 2010/11. At the end of the data collection phase, in 2013/14 when they were in Year 12, the young people were aged 16 to 17.

From the 45 young people who were deemed by the school to be at risk of becoming NEET, a sub-set (C) of 18 students was selected by the school to take part in interventions instigated and led by the school with the intention of minimizing this risk, in some cases in association with charities. These 18 ‘at-risk’ students comprise the Intervention Class. They also took part in focus group discussions with me, which I have designated as follows: Girls’ Intervention Group and Boys’ Intervention Group. From the 240 young people not deemed at risk of becoming NEET, a sub-set (D) of 18 pupils was selected by the school to take part in focus group discussions with me. I have designated these as follows: Girls’ Non-Intervention Group and Boys’ Non-Intervention Group. Figure 9 illustrates these groupings in graphical form.



*Figure 9. Graphical representation of sub-sets of pupils in the study*

## Ethical issues

This study was a collaborative work in which the school, on behalf of the pupils and in accordance with its safeguarding role, took full responsibility for ethical decisions which arose and, as noted in the Introductory chapter, ethical approval for the study was granted by King's College London (see Appendix 3).

As noted above and illustrated in Figures 7 and 8, the research design changed from evaluative to explanatory. As a consequence, modifications to the original ethical approval were sought and given by King's College London (see Appendix 3).

Throughout my study I endeavoured to be consistent with BERA recommendations that educational research should be conducted:

within an ethic of respect for: the person; knowledge; democratic values; the quality of educational research; and academic freedom. Trust is a further essential element within the relationship between researcher and researched, as is the expectation that researchers will accept responsibility for their actions.

(BERA, 2018, p.5).

In a collaborative research study such as this, the ethics of respect principles are challenging because a balance needs to be sought between the stakeholders' concerns, and expectations and my need as the researcher to adhere to the ethic of respect. I discuss these challenges by reference to the following five responsibilities, as stated in the BERA Guidelines:

- responsibilities to participants
- responsibilities to sponsors, clients and stakeholders in research
- responsibilities to the community of educational researchers
- responsibilities for publication and dissemination
- responsibilities for researchers' wellbeing and development

(BERA, 2018, p 5)

I met my responsibilities to the participants and stakeholders, after discussions with and in collaboration with the school, through a range of procedures and considerations. For example, I asked my research participants to complete the

questionnaire voluntarily and without prejudice. All questionnaires were anonymized to ensure confidentiality and I explained this to the pupils. They completed the questionnaires in their Tutorial sessions, as part of their normal school activities. By the time the young people were aged 15, I considered that they had enough maturity and understanding to make an informed individual choice to participate. Consequently, all those who took part in focus groups signed consent forms, in accordance with BERA Guidelines (BERA, 2018).

As I got to know the pupils, I believe they came to trust me. This became evident in the conversations in the focus groups. I also believe the school trusted me to give a fair account of what happened in the study.

The most challenging issue arose as a consequence of the school, as the prime educational stakeholder, deciding not to inform the young people who were in the Intervention Group that they had been identified as at high risk of becoming NEET. The school managers told me this was because they did not want to stigmatize these young people by attaching this label to them or put them off participating in the Intervention Class. Accordingly, it was described to pupils by the school as a careers class, the purpose of which was to help the participants make decisions about their next steps and to give them extra time to complete coursework and this accurately reflected the content of the sessions. I also understand that while the teachers and charities' facilitators delivering these Intervention Programmes were aware that these young people had been selected by the school as likely to benefit from the activities; they were not aware that these young people were deemed at high risk of becoming NEET.

In the circumstances of this research I sought to maintain an ethic of respect. I respected the school's concern that if the young people had been told they had been identified as at risk of becoming NEET this might have led to negative thoughts, feelings and actions. Of course, it might instead have resulted in positive reactions and young people might have changed their behaviour to try to lessen their perceived risk of becoming NEET. However, the school believed that not telling the participants of their 'at-risk' status was the correct decision and I was bound by that decision, within the terms of my ethical approval for the study. I also had concerns



about the robustness and validity of the RONI used to identify pupils as at-risk (or not) of becoming NEET (see Chapter 2). After careful consideration and in consultation with my supervisors, I decided to accept the school's decision.

I met my responsibilities to the community of educational research by continuing this important study, bringing the young people's voices to the fore, and by being open and transparent. I describe the changes made within the research and critically examined the research instruments used within it. In addition, I have presented this research honestly and will publish and disseminate this research critically, whilst upholding its integrity as a worthwhile study.

As a researcher I have been aware of tension between my desire to complete this study and forces outside my control which did at times affect my wellbeing. I have sought advice from my supervisors and others when this happened. I have gained skills and knowledge through the undertaking of this study and hope to use these skills in the future to continue my development as an ethical researcher.

After due consideration of these ethical issues I chose my research questions, which are presented next.

### Research questions

Against this background, my research questions are as follows.

#### Main research question:

- How do pupils of a secondary school in an inner-city Local Authority with a large number of NEETs, perceive their experience of school and their aspirations in relation to their future prospects for education, work and life?

#### Subsidiary research questions:

- What are pupils' aims, aspirations and ambitions? Do they change over time? Do they differ between those identified as at risk of becoming NEET and those not so identified?
- How do pupils engage with school-led interventions designed to mitigate their perceived risk of becoming NEET?

- How do pupils attending school-led interventions designed to mitigate their risk of becoming NEET talk about their future prospects for work, education, and life as compared to those not identified as at risk?

The study focuses on the different groupings within a cohort of young people attending one school in order to minimise the risk of over-stating any differences between the at-risk and not-at-risk groups, as identified by the RONI. Specifically, four groups of pupils from the whole cohort (n=285) are identified as:

- Sub-set A: pupils identified by the RONI as not at risk of becoming NEET (n=245);
- Sub-set B: pupils identified by the RONI as at risk of becoming NEET (n=45)
- Sub-set C comprised 18 pupils selected by the school to be subject to the intervention (n=18);
- Sub-set D, comprising pupils selected by the school from the not-at-risk group (n=18).

Data were gathered on the whole sample (285 pupils) at the beginning of the following academic years: (See Table 5 for actual numbers)

- Academic year 2010/2011: sample aged 13/14; Year 9;
- Academic year 2011/2012: sample aged 14/15; Year 10;
- Academic year 2012/2013: sample aged 15/16; Year 11;
- Academic year 2013/2014: sample aged 16/17; Year 12.

Additional data on pupils in Sub-set C were gathered throughout the following academic years:

- Academic year 2011/2012: sample aged 14/15; Year 10;
- Academic year 2012/2013: sample aged 15/16; Year 11.

Data on pupils in Sub-set D were gathered in the following academic year:

- Academic year 2012/2013: sample aged 15/16; Year 11.

Table 5

*Data collection by date, age and school year of pupils, and sample sub-sets*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Age of pupils/ School Year</b>	<b>Whole cohort (universal set) n = 285</b>	<b>Sub-set A Pupils not identified as at risk of becoming NEET n=240</b>	<b>Sub-set B Pupils identified as at risk of becoming NEET n = 45</b>	<b>Sub-set C Intervention group: pupils identified as at risk of becoming NEET who experienced school-led interventions n = 18</b>	<b>Sub-set D Sample of pupils not identified as at risk of becoming NEET (nested sub-set of Sub-set A) n = 18</b>
Oct 2010	Pupils aged 13/14 School Year 9	Completed quantitative questionnaire; n = 222				
Oct 2011	Pupils aged 14/15 School Year 10	Completed quantitative questionnaire; n = 228 Matched responses Year 9 and Year 10; n = 161 (see 'Attrition' graph, p.144)				
Nov 2011 to May 2012					Observations of interventions x 15 hours	
Oct 2012	Pupils aged 15/16 School Year 11	Completed quantitative questionnaire; n = 190 Matched responses Year 9, Year 10 and Year 11; n = 119 (see Figure 10 Attrition graph p.141)				
April 2013					2 focus groups, each with 9 pupils; n = 18	2 focus groups, each with 9 pupils
Jan 2014	Pupils aged 16/17 School Year 12	Completed quantitative questionnaire (n = 86) Matched responses Year 9, Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12; n = 56 (see Attrition graph, p.144)				

The methods of data collection include:

- A questionnaire administered to the whole cohort over a four-year period as the young people matured, analysed through an examination of the statistics generated by the responses to the questions (n = 285);
- Focus group discussions with young people deemed at risk of becoming NEET (Sub-set C; n = 18); data analysed through coding within a thematic analysis model;
- Focus group discussions with young people not deemed at risk of becoming NEET; data analysed through coding within a thematic analysis model (Sub-set D; n = 18);

- Participant observations of 15 hours of intervention; data analysed using thick description (Sub-set C; n = 18).

Below is an introduction to the methods chosen. Following this I give a more detailed account of each method.

Qualitative data were gathered through 15 hours of observations of school-initiated interventions over a two-year period with young people in Years 10 and 11 who were deemed by the school to be at risk of becoming NEET (Sub-set C). The purpose was to observe the content of these sessions and the young peoples' reaction to activities.

In addition, two focus groups from Sub-set C were established, the focus of which was two-fold: to elicit more in-depth understanding of young peoples' aims, attitudes and aspirations in order to ascertain how far they conform to, or align with, the dominant ideologies of individual advocacy as the route to success; and to elicit how these young people experience the interventions they have taken part in. Each of the focus groups contained nine young people aged 14 to 15, selected from the intervention group of young people deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET (Sub-set C).

Two further focus groups from Sub-set D were also established, the foci of which were to elicit more in-depth understanding of the young peoples' aims, attitudes and ambitions in order to ascertain how far they conform to, or align with, the dominant ideologies of individual advocacy as the route to success. Each of the focus groups contained nine young people aged 14 to 15, selected from a mixed-ability form group. These groups represent a small sub-set (n=36) of pupils who completed the questionnaire (n = 285).

Quantitative analysis was undertaken through:

- statistics gathered from national databases, e.g., the YCS and LSYPE, in accordance with my research aims 1 and 2;

- a questionnaire on the young peoples' aims, ambitions and aspirations, administered over a period of four years. This questionnaire was initially completed by 222 young people in one Year 9 cohort (aged 13/14) in the school in Academic year 2010/2011. The same young people were then asked to complete the questionnaire again as they progressed into Year 10 (aged 14/15), Year 11 (aged 15/16) and Year 12 (aged 16/17). I analysed these data to see, for example, if there were significant differences in responses to questions as the young people get older, or if there were significant differences between the answers given by different groups (e.g., those identified by the school as potential NEETs or non-NEETs). The topics covered include demographic factors, young peoples' aims, ambitions and aspirations and attitudes to school. See Figure 10 for full attrition figures.

### The period covered by the study

The methods chosen to investigate my research question as explained above were: a questionnaire, focus groups, and participant observations. Each is discussed in turn.

### Questionnaires

Here I explain why questionnaires are an appropriate source of data for my purposes and how the questionnaires help me to answer my research question.

In general, questionnaires are a useful data source as they provide an opportunity to gather data from a large set of people; they are cost effective and relatively quick to administer. In addition, self-completion questionnaires are not exposed to interview bias. However, there are disadvantages to this data collection tool: to be acceptable they normally contain short, mostly closed questions, thus in-depth questions are not asked, it is difficult to follow up responses, and asking too many questions or too many open questions that require a lot of writing may result in partial completion. In addition, participants may have questions or queries that cannot be addressed. In the following discussion I explain how I mitigated against these disadvantages to some extent.

The questionnaire afforded me the opportunity to survey one cohort of young people over four years and to glean how that cohort rated their experience of school. It was

initially instigated by the school. Design of the RONI (as discussed previously in Chapter 2) was informed by data of the statistical possibility of young people becoming NEET. These data highlighted poor attendance, low achievement and family background as risk factors to becoming NEET. However, the school required a more tangible, perhaps more personal approach, and wanted other information that could create a more effective picture. They wanted answers to a series of questions. For example, are the ambitions, attitudes and activities of those potential NEETs different from those of potential non-NEETs? How could this be measured with reliability, validity and accuracy? The school Senior Management Team was considering using online questionnaires to enhance their knowledge of their pupils' ambitions and attitudes to learning. However, they found these online questionnaires to be expensive and they were also concerned about confidentiality, the time it would take for participants to complete them, and logistical issues related to the availability and use of computers. As a result this idea was dropped by the school.

Subsequently<sup>16</sup>, I was asked to help the Senior Management Team to devise a simple questionnaire for pupils in Year 9. As this was a collaborative research project I agreed. I brought to the table a knowledge of NEETs and their characteristics. The Senior Management Team wanted to know how ambitious their pupils were, if they had plans to go to university, if they liked school, who they looked to for career advice, etc. They wanted me to examine whether there was evidence of difference between various groups within its school community, for example, between those pupils receiving free school meals and those not, as well as any notable changes as the cohort matured. In response I, along with the Senior Management Team, devised a self-completion questionnaire to be administered to the whole cohort in Year 9 (n=285) and repeated each year over a four-year period as the pupils matured. I analysed the results using SPSS. The four questionnaires are referred to here as the Year 9, Year 10, Year 11 and Year 12 questionnaires (see Appendix 2 for questionnaires and Appendix 3 for the school's statement taking responsibility for any ethical issues that may have arisen). Each questionnaire was devised by me and the Senior Management Team and questions were changed and modified through consensus.

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<sup>16</sup> By this time I had left the employment of the Local Authority.

The questionnaire had three parts, Part One consisted of statements and questions such as, “Do you like school?” and the participants were asked to rate on a Likert scale how far they agreed with these (see Appendix 2 for copies of the questionnaires). The first seven questions in each questionnaire were designed to ascertain pupils’ attitudes and ambitions. I was aware that some participants might give answers that they thought that the school or I would want, and I have taken this into account in my analysis and findings in later chapters. These seven questions were informed by the activities of 16-year olds identified through the analysis of LYPSE data (DCSF/ONS, 2008, 2009; DfE/ONS, 2010, 2011). Over the four years there were slight modifications in the questionnaires. These changes were agreed in my meetings with the Senior Management Team. The school had the ultimate say on which questions were asked and which were changed over time. Some of these changes were necessary due to a change in the law which required all pupils who were aged 17 and 18 to stay in education. Thus, the statement, “At 16 I will stay on at school” was removed as it was redundant since this cohort was the first to be obliged to stay on until they were 17. In Year 12 the pupils were asked some additional open questions (see Appendix 2).

The second part of the questionnaire listed activities and required the participants to say if they had undertaken these activities, to indicate if they were at risk of underachievement. This part was instigated through an examination of research that indicated that under-achievement has an impact on risk. For example, a report for the Rowntree Foundation (Goodman & Gregg, 2010) found that 85 percent of NEET young people do not have five ‘good’ GCSEs. Conversely, the report found that young people are more likely to do well at GCSE if their parents: think it likely that the young person will go on to higher education; devote material resources towards education, including private tuition, computer and internet access; spend time sharing family meals and outings; and quarrel with their child relatively infrequently. The Rowntree study also found that young people are more likely to do well at GCSE if the young person him/herself: has a greater belief in his/her own ability at school; believes that events result primarily from his/her own behaviour and actions; finds school worthwhile; thinks it is likely that he/she will apply to, and get into, higher education; avoids risky behaviour such as frequent smoking, cannabis

use, anti-social behaviour, truancy, suspension and exclusion; and does not experience bullying (Goodman & Gregg, eds 2010).

Asking the pupils to indicate activities listed in Part Two was an attempt to identify those who were taking part in risky behaviours or positive behaviours, both of which might contribute to their future achievement.

The third part of the questionnaire asked questions to ascertain some background information of the participants, e.g., their parents' job/s and how many lived in their household. This section was added in Year 10 after consultation with the school. Its purpose was to add to the information that could be gained. For example, did those participants with parents with routine jobs aspire to attend university in the same numbers as those with parents in higher professions?

How the questionnaire was administered.

#### Confidentiality

The questionnaire needed to be matched year on year. Each pupil has a unique learner number, and this was printed on the questionnaire. The school knew the name of the pupil and their unique number; they handed the questionnaire to each pupil and I collected the questionnaire. The name of the pupil did not appear anywhere on the questionnaire. I could not match the name of the pupil to their unique number and the school was never given information that would allow them to match the responses to an individual pupil. Thus, confidentiality was never compromised.

#### Administration

The questionnaire was printed by the school office and each Form Tutor was given their questionnaires for their form and they arranged for the completion of them in tutorial time. The young people arrived at school at 8.35am and their first lesson was 9am. The questionnaire was completed by all pupils in this tutorial time between 8.35am and 9am. Once the questionnaires were all completed, or the form tutor believed as many were completed as possible, they were returned to me. I joined classes in the first year the questionnaires were administered to assist with this and to



answer queries and present the research. In Years 10 and 11 it was deemed more time-efficient for form tutors to administer the questionnaire over a two-week period. In Year 12, this procedure changed as some of the pupils had left the school to study in colleges. Therefore, those who attended the school completed the questionnaire in the tutorial time, as in previous years, but several questionnaires were sent out by post to pupils no longer attending the school. The response from these ex-pupils was poor, despite the incentive of a draw for gift vouchers.

### Attrition

Below is a graphical representation of the number of questionnaires completed by each year group and across year groups (Figure 10). The same cohort of pupils was tracked over four years. Each colour represents the number of pupils completing the questionnaire by the year or number of years they did so. For example, the orange bar represents and gives the number of pupils who completed the questionnaire in all four years. This attrition was caused by: pupils leaving and joining the school; absenteeism; spoilt or illegible questionnaires; and refusal to participate.

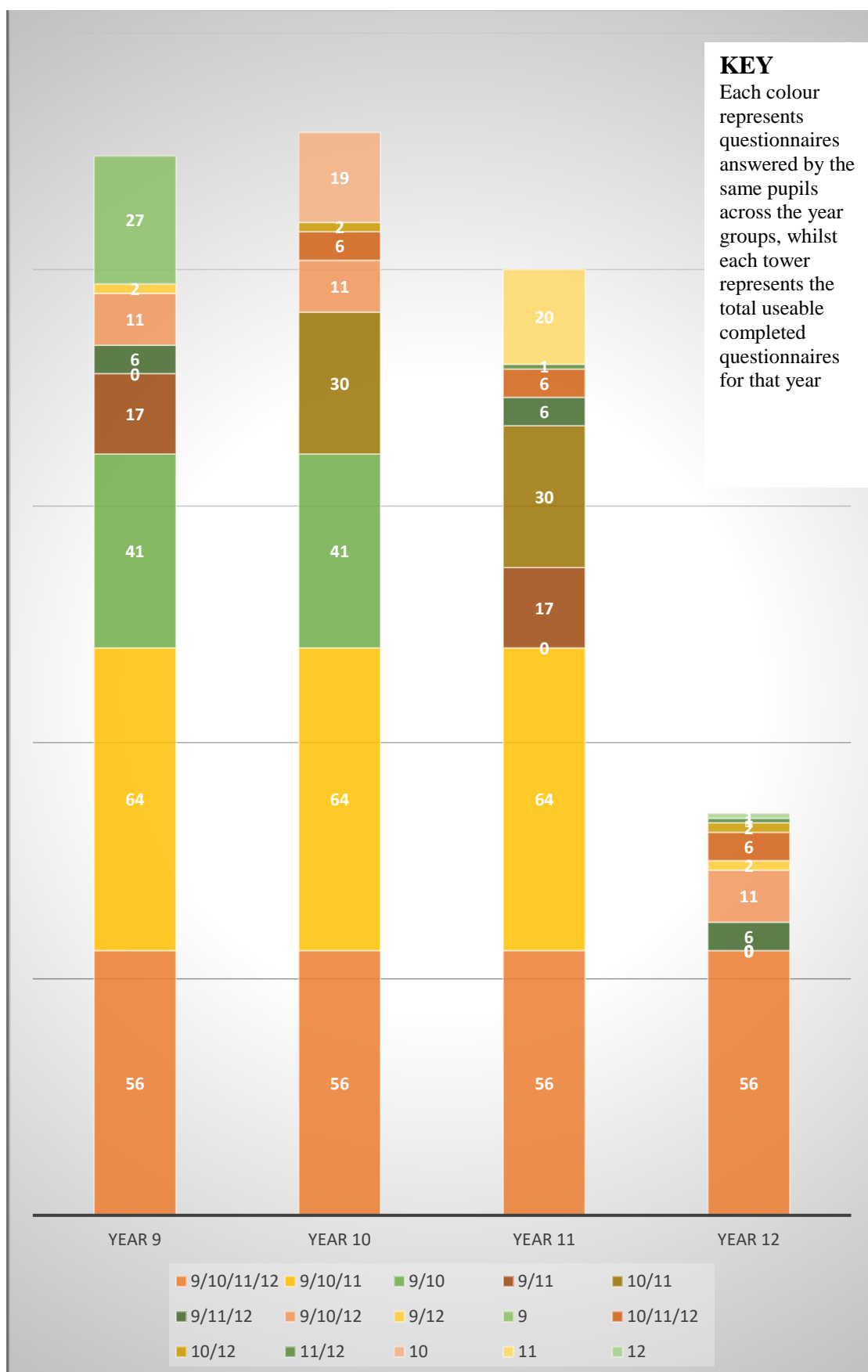


Figure 10. A summary of the questionnaires completed over time

## Focus groups

The questionnaire supplied answers to questions such as, “Do your teachers like you?”, “Do you like school?”. However, questionnaires can be ambiguous and may force participants to select the answer of ‘best fit’ rather than ‘real fit’. I, and the school, wanted to find out what aspects of school the pupils valued, and the school was also keen to find out if the pupils really did know what pathways were open to them at 16. I also wanted to find out from those pupils in the Intervention Class how they felt about their experience. I raised the possibility of arranging some Year 11 focus groups in the school. Powell and Single (1996, p. 499) define a focus group as, “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research”. I did this because focus groups would allow me to explore the pupils’ experiences of school and the interventions in relation to their attitudes, aspirations and ambitions. I also hoped to ‘get behind’ the statistics gathered by the questionnaire. This could be regarded as triangulation, which is defined as using different kinds of data on the same topic to deepen and enrich the understanding of the study (Bloor, 2001, p. 13). Focus groups lend themselves well to a multi-modal method of research and validity checking as discussed by Morgan (1996). The use of focus groups is a useful addition as it requires no specialist skills of participants and is time-limited (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001, p. 13).

While there are many advantages to using focus groups, there are some limitations that I needed to consider. Firstly, the data gathered from a focus group are not normally as deep as those gathered from longer, more structured interviews (Berg, 2004). I carefully considered the depth of detail I required before selecting the focus group method. I could instead have chosen to interview the pupils one-to-one; however, this would have restricted me to a smaller number of pupils because of time constraints. Focus groups also gave me a chance to explore the degree of consensus on the subjects discussed by a group of pupils. Furthermore, researchers are often perceived to have power during an individual interview, whereas during a focus group there is an interaction that places everyone on a, “more even footing with each other and the investigator” (Berg, 2004, p.127). However, I must acknowledge that this may not have been the case in this instance as I was an adult

and therefore may have been regarded by the pupils as a person with authority over them. In addition, focus groups enable adolescents to participate in groups with their peers and can be empowering for those participating if they perceive that they will be listened to and their opinions valued (Emler & Reicher, 1995). These are valuable considerations as my focus group participants were 14 and 15-year-olds and I wanted them to feel at ease with me and amongst their peers.

A further question was whether to target a heterogeneous sample (in which everybody is different) or homogeneous sample (in which everybody is as similar as possible). Most researchers prefer a homogeneous group with the common threads being the issues for discussion (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996). By their very nature my groups could be classed as homogeneous for the following reasons: they were all 15-year-olds; they attended the same school; they completed the questionnaires; and they all discussed their experience of school. However, the four groups differed in that they were first selected by the criterion of being or not being at risk of becoming NEET and then, secondly, by gender, thus making the claim of homogenous groups less clear cut.

Macintosh (1993) advises that the ideal size of a focus group is between six and ten people and my groups were consistent with this as they were comprised of nine young people. However, I had to make some compromises because of the exigencies of the school. For example, focus groups usually last between one and two hours (Powell & Single, 1996) but, given the constraints of the school timetable, mine lasted for one lesson period of 45 minutes, arranged by the school.

### Administration

The four focus groups were categorised as: Boys' Non-Intervention (BNI); Girls' Non-Intervention (GNI); Boys Intervention (BI); and Girls Intervention (GI). Each group consisted of nine pupils (see Figure 9 for a graphical representation of these sub-sets). The Non-Intervention Groups were selected by the school, which chose pupils who were identified as at low risk of becoming NEET and who were available to take part in the focus groups. In my study, the purpose of these focus groups was to answer my subsidiary research question: how do pupils in school-led interventions

designed to mitigate their risk of becoming NEET and a sample of pupils deemed not at risk of becoming NEET discuss their experience? These groups were split by gender only because the timing of the focus groups coincided with Physical Education (PE) lessons which were gender-specific. This was the decision of the school.

I began these focus groups by explaining the purpose of my research. I explained that other people, politicians, parents teachers all had views on what school was for but what I was interested in was what they thought about school their experiences, things they liked, disliked, their opinions. I asked questions along the following lines: What do you think school is for? What do you think education is for? As intended, these questions prompted the young people to talk freely about all aspects of school. All the focus groups quickly took the lead and discussed school and education and how they felt about it: what it gave them; the purpose of school and education; how it could help them; and their experiences of school. With my question 'Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?', I wanted to know the young people's far-reaching ambitions and hopes for the future, including their more personal hopes and dreams, rather than just their plans for their education or first occupation. A third question was asked in the focus groups that had participated in the interventions instigated by the school to mitigate the risk of these pupils becoming NEET. It was, simply, 'What do you think about the interventions?'. In all the focus groups I asked subsidiary questions to clarify points or to encourage greater depth in the pupils' answers. I did not have any specific expectations of what these young people might focus on and my role was to encourage them to express their views on any topic related to school, to education more broadly, their experience and their future plans.

I sought permission to record these groups, assuring the pupils that their responses would not appear in such a way as to identify them to the school or to other pupils. Before we started our discussion, I impressed upon them that they should keep what was heard confidential to the group. I set the same ground rules for each group: turn-taking; no offensive language; and respecting different opinions. All focus groups were audio-recorded, and all recordings were later transcribed by me. There was one occasion in a focus group when I asked a boy to leave as his behaviour was

unacceptable and could have caused harm to others, otherwise the pupils' behaviour in the focus groups was acceptable. The young people in the focus groups were in the main keen to help and were happy to answer the questions and generally chat about school, although some were just happy to talk, and it was at times difficult to keep them on track. Most of the participants behaved in a sensible mature way. I felt that all the young people gave honest answers and were at ease with the process.

### Participant observation

Participant observation is used widely in social research and can be a useful tool by which data is gathered that allows the experience of the research subjects to be at the forefront. According to Morrison (2002, p.31), "A major advantage of participant observation is that you get fresh impressions, right as things are happening. You can see how the experience evolves, how the impressions change, how people navigate a situation". Participant observation was chosen for this research because the school had identified 18 pupils who it was felt would benefit from some extra help in their transition to GCSE year and thus their future planning. As the experiences of these young people were of paramount importance to my research question, I believed that observation of the type of interventions they were subject to would offer insights into their experience. It also afforded me a greater opportunity to get to know these young people and observe their behaviour in a class setting.

Participant observation is not without challenges. These include getting access to the site, finding a role appropriate to the group, truthfully considering the effect that the presence of the researcher has on the participants and reporting and analysing the findings in an insightful manner without compromising the rigour and objectivity of the research process. As I had worked for the Local Authority which was very keen for this work to continue, access to the site, in my case the school, was not problematic. With reference to Evered and Reis Louis (2001), I believe I was primarily an "inside participant observer" because I was immersed in the situation; I was observing the young people and their interactions with teachers and facilitators and I was a participant in the sense that I would organise activities, occasionally adopting the role of Teaching Assistant. I could not be a participant of the interventions as I was, after all, not aged 15. However, I became immersed in, and

part of the phenomenon under study. The pupils were told of my role and addressed me as 'Miss'. I acknowledge that my presence in class may have influenced the behaviour of the participants. They may have been variously eager to please, noisier than usual, apt to show off, or try to use me to undermine their teacher's authority. I believe I was regarded as having some authority and as someone who could report back to the teachers if the young people misbehaved. I think over time the young people did appreciate that everything they said to me in relation to the interventions and how they felt about school, or the teachers, was kept confidential.

### Administration

After some preliminary selection processes using the RONI and other information, including personal attributes that were not evidenced within the RONI, such as behaviour and willingness to participate, the school selected 18 pupils for an intervention programme. These selected pupils were all deemed at high risk of becoming NEET. However, the RONI identified 45 such pupils, of whom the Senior Management Team selected only 18 to participate. The school's selection of the 18 pupils was on the basis of their behaviour and willingness to participate. This further indicates possible inadequacies in the RONI as a tool for identifying those at risk of becoming NEET.

The Senior Management Team envisaged that this intervention programme would offer these young people more one-to-one career advice, help them to understand their options and perhaps use some of the time to complete coursework for GCSEs. The school sought permission from the pupils' parents and explained the advantages of being withdrawn from Religious Education in order to attend the intervention. I was told by a member of the Senior Management Team that these advantages were expressed to the pupils and their parents as: time to complete coursework; examinations preparation; job preparation; and careers information.

For the first academic year, Teacher A was timetabled for this hour and in the second academic year, Teacher B was timetabled for this hour. These teachers held posts with responsibility for career advice. Before the intervention begun, a charity approached the school with an offer of inspirational speakers and mentoring for

those pupils who would most benefit. The charity worked with many schools in different Local Authorities and aimed to build pupils' confidence and self-esteem through engaging sessions. There was also another organisation that was concerned with apprenticeships who attended for six weeks and ran sessions on compiling *curricula vitae* (cvs), interview skills and how to apply for apprenticeships. The remainder of the sessions were a mixture of careers advice and other suitable activities, some of which I instigated. The charities' facilitators and other teachers involved in the delivery of these intervention programmes understood that these pupils had been selected by the school as likely to benefit from the activities; they were unaware that had been deemed to be at high risk of becoming NEET.

I observed or participated in 15 sessions out of an approximate total of 60. I acknowledge that, as I led some of the intervention sessions, my observations may have been biased in that perhaps I was looking for certain attributes in the facilitator's actions and reactions. As an educator for many years preceding this research, I had taught many classes and trained tutors; from this I would have some expectations of roles of facilitators and teachers. Below is a list of the interventions that I observed or participated in.



*Table 6 Observations undertaken by the researcher*

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Who was present</b> (includes pseudonyms)	<b>Brief description of content</b>
<b>City Hopes</b>	Jerry and Jay Ann McDonnell observing only	Talking about positive attitudes
<b>City Hopes</b>	Jerry and Jay Ann McDonnell observing only	Emotions
<b>City Hopes</b>	Jay Ann McDonnell observing only	One-to-one mentoring x2
<b>City Hopes</b>	Simon Ann McDonnell observing only	Right brain/left brain learning styles. The human heart
<b>City Hopes</b>	Teacher A Simon Ann McDonnell observing only	Analogy of having a baby and nurturing it and having a dream and nurturing it
<b>Apprenticeships</b>	Lesley Ann McDonnell assisting	What employers want and value
<b>Apprenticeships</b>	Lesley Ann McDonnell assisting	Interview skills
<b>Apprenticeships</b>	Lesley Ann McDonnell assisting	CV writing- 2 sessions
<b>Other sessions led by teachers</b>	Ann McDonnell leading	Reading newspaper stories and sharing
	Ann McDonnell leading	GROW (Goal-Reality-Options-Will)
	Ann McDonnell leading	Careers advice/internet search
	Various throughout Ann McDonnell observing only	Coursework/revision exam practice
<b>Inspire</b>	Group leader Ann McDonnell observing only (and judging best competitor)	Making paper T shirts in groups with a winner

I wrote copious notes during the sessions that I observed, and I wrote up the sessions I had participated in as soon as I was able after the sessions ended. I was able to write almost verbatim accounts of the mentors' conversations with the mentees. In other sessions that I was not a participant in I noted what the young people were doing and saying, what the facilitators were doing and saying, the general behaviour patterns and the setting in which these interactions took place. At this stage of the research, my intention was to gather as much potentially relevant information as possible. These notes were subsequently subjected to narrative interpretation and thick description (Geertz, 1975).

I will now set out how I prepared my data for analysis.

#### Process of analysis: how I prepared my data

I have used both quantitative and qualitative data; both are consistent with my research questions and my overall research design within a case study approach.

#### The use of SPSS

The questionnaires were completed by the same cohort for four years. After each year, I produced a summary for the school. This summary included the percentage of pupils who answered positively to the questions and statements, for example, "I will go to university". After two years, I also produced comparative summaries and year-on-year I did the same. However, this was a basic use of the data and I wanted to compare groups within years and across years in a more sophisticated way. I wanted to compare different aspects within groups, for example, risk of becoming NEET in relation to gender. In order to conduct more detailed statistical analysis, I decided to input all the data into the statistical package SPSS. This involved creating variables and making decisions about how best to combine some elements to achieve a variable that represented, for example, positivity or negativity about school. The questions/statements were scored using a Likert scale and each response was put into SPSS with one as a positive indicator and five as a negative indicator. I decided to create a statistical mean variable of the accumulative score. Thus, over the four years I could see if participants became more positive or more negative overall.

I created a coding sheet for each questionnaire first, and then the data were put into SPSS. I randomly checked 10 percent of the data entered to ensure accuracy perimeters. During this phase, I became aware of the inconsistency of the data collected regarding the pupils' activities in Part 2 of the questionnaire. My original idea had been to classify groups of activities as: positive influences; negative influences; and risky behaviours. However, the activity sheets were left blank by many participants, or appeared to have been randomly ticked or crossed, or various numbers had been entered and there was little consistency from year to year. This led me to the conclusion that this information was neither reliable nor valid and as such should not be included in my analysis. Part 3 was also poorly completed; I believe this was due to time pressures. After entering all the other data from all the years, I ran statistical tests. These are outlined and discussed in Chapter 5. I interpreted the results of these tests and the other information I had acquired through examining the answers given in the questionnaire, to reach some tentative conclusions which are discussed in Chapter 6.

#### Analysis of focus group data

The focus groups took place in April 2013. I transcribed all conversation in the focus groups verbatim. I also added notes that I had taken at the time to indicate body language and other non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions, raised eyebrows, or head shaking. This note-taking was not completed for every minute of the focus group discussion and was sometimes added after the focus group had finished. Nonetheless at times it was invaluable. For example, a silence on the recorded account of the focus group conversations could be conceived as 'nothing happening' whereas quite the opposite might be true. There were many pauses, and pupils made sceptical facial expressions in response to some of the questions asked or to answers given by fellow pupils. The actual words of the pupils were analysed as described below, other aspects added to my interpretation of their meaning.

#### Observations

I took notes during the observations of the interventions that I was not participating in. I summarised the salient points of these sessions and noted things of interest and things I might look for in future sessions such as behaviour patterns, group

dynamics, etc. I wrote summaries as immediately as I was able after taking part in interventions as a participant. There may have been things I missed, however, I believe what is noticed is what is important. These notes and summaries were analysed as described below.

### Approach

Arguably, since Weber, Baehr and Wells (2002) and the concept of *verstehen* – empathic understanding of something in its context - descriptive interpretation has been a model to gain access through reflective analysis to the meaning of people's experiences and perceptions. However, many different approaches and procedures for undertaking this work have emerged. These include discourse analysis, conversation analysis, Grounded Theory, phenomenology and thematic analysis. Analysing qualitative data is often described as a staged process: the data are prepared, organised, and interpreted. The analysis takes what was said or observed and goes beyond descriptive prose to an analytical interpretation, the purpose of which is to answer, or at least illuminate research questions. This seemingly simple staged approach masks a plethora of different methodological and theoretical viewpoints on how to analyse qualitative data effectively.

The approach I have chosen I have defined as thematic analysis with elements of thick description. I have taken a pragmatic approach to using different coding techniques and narrative analysis to explore different data in order to address my research questions. To constrain the way I analysed my data to a particular school of thought, would, I believe, restrict my interpretation. The principles I have adhered to for the focus groups data are initial coding and categorisation of codes, allowing for the emergence of theoretical themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). My interpretation of the interventions is best described as thick description (Geertz, 1975) whereby I interpret the behaviour, voices and gestures of the pupils I observed in context and through the narrative I produce I illustrate the themes that emerge. I want the data and coding to be as rich as possible and I believe that qualitative data should be upheld as a research method that has its own place within research.

### Why coding is appropriate for this research

Coding, as an appropriate method of extracting meaning from qualitative data, is not undisputed. Packer (2011, p.80) argues that the strongest objection to coding as a way of analysing interviews is not philosophical but more simply that it does not work and is impossible in practice. I understand this viewpoint; coding could be seen as reductive and so subjective that it is rendered a useless tool in understanding and interpreting data. However, many conversations and discussions, even those of the greatest importance to an individual or group, are synthesised, summarised in the coding process. Verbatim accounts are rarely produced except in law courts. Most meetings are minuted with salient points and action points, not who said what. I do not see coding as a reductive exercise, rather as an enlightening experience. Like the minute taker, I am listening to the spoken words and finding the patterns, the agreement, the salient points. I am endeavouring to present the core, the nub of the matter. In order to justify the choices that I have made and the theoretical viewpoints that have emerged I am presenting evidence of the actual words spoken, of the process used for breaking this down into patterns and then formulating a theoretical position. In this way I concur with the view of Grbich (2012, p.21) that coding involves a process that allows data to be, “segregated, grouped, regrouped and relinked in order to consolidate meaning and explanation”. I believe that coding allows me to interpret my data in a way that is true to my ontological and epistemological standing, and any criticisms can be addressed through transparency and honesty. This transparency is required so the reader can examine my position and where my influences lie.

### The coding processes

The focus groups were rich in data highlighting the experiences of the pupils, so I began my analysis with the focus group data. I investigated the use of software programmes for analysis but decided that I wanted to really immerse myself in the data and physically move papers around and create diagrams. I wrote every sentence spoken by the pupils on a post-it note. These post-it notes were in four colours to indicate which focus group had said what, e.g., yellow represented the Boys' Non-Intervention group. I then started to apply initial codes to these, for example, 'anxiety', 'confusion', 'teachers' pay', 'teachers' attitudes', 'material possessions',

‘jobs’, and ‘career paths’. I then categorised and re-categorised these until I was left with five clear codes which had emerged: school purpose; school reality; expectations; anxiety; and othering. At this stage, I studied each code to interpret and analyse how the young people were describing and talking about their experiences. By this process, I realised the individuals within the data showed varying degrees of confidence, goal setting and self-esteem. This led me to Bandura’s theories of TRD and SCT, outlined above in Chapter 3, and my overarching themes of self-efficacy and agency and TRD of the environment, personal traits and behaviour. I therefore performed six stages as depicted below in Figure 12. A detailed description of the results of this process is in Chapter 5.

<p><b>Data → Categories → Codes → Interpretation and analysis → Theoretical perspective → themes</b></p>
--

*Figure 11 My six-stage process of thematic analysis*

### Thick description

The observation material was prepared as described above. In this way, the narrative and the thick description of the observations was already in an emerging form. These descriptions were examined with reference to the aspects that arose through the coding process of the focus group data and were used to examine how these aspects were present in the interactions in the classroom.

### Reflections

This research started as one thing and ended up completely different, partly through circumstances involving my redundancy and partly through the collaborative nature of this research. Collaborative working is a balance between the desired joint working and the pressures to be accepted and useful. At times, I became a facilitator and worked closely with teachers in the classroom, and other times I was an outsider looking in. The twists and turns of this research could not have been envisaged or mitigated. The initial intention was to evaluate the interventions instigated by all schools, and then the research site became one school. As a researcher working collaboratively, I had limited authority to conduct research in any particular way. For example, to evaluate the impact of the interventions some criteria for evaluation would need to be in place. This would have involved a ‘before and after’ type of

assessment/evaluation. This was talked about with senior managers at the school but never instigated or sanctioned by the school. Also, the school was approached by various charities with their own agendas and these opportunities were taken up; these charities' schemes had their own evaluation criteria. I could only observe these interventions. When these observations began, it became clear that the voice of the participants and how they perceived the interventions and how such interventions served to contextualise the NEET debate around the individual and wider context needed to be examined. Hence this was one reason for focus groups. The focus groups were split by gender as described earlier in this chapter. If mixed groups had taken place, different group dynamics may have been present, resulting in different comments and discussions.

As noted above, the questionnaire was instigated by the school which was keen to ascertain the level of ambition across the cohort. It became a useful addition to ascertain the differences and similarities which emerged among different groups designated by gender, high risk of becoming NEET, etc. The questionnaire would have benefited from rigorous piloting and more input from the young people themselves. Piloting might have resulted in amendments to the questions or a different scaling system that the participants might have related to more readily and as a result a pilot might have enhanced the quantitative element of my study. In the event, this was not possible due to time constraints within the school.

If time had allowed, I would have liked to conduct more focus groups, especially after analysing the data, as I might have gleaned more information about specific elements and tested my theoretical conclusions. In addition, a mix of boys and girls within a focus group might have added another dimension to this research and changed the dynamic of the groups. For example, some girls might have been more reluctant to express their desire to be married and have children in a mixed group.

The most enjoyable aspect of collecting the data was the time I spent in class with the young people; they were engaging and interesting. Some told me of difficult beginnings and the pressures they felt from inside and outside school. They shared with me their hopes, dreams and frustrations. The research design always stayed

within the perimeters of the case study paradigm and I am grateful for the flexibility this allowed me.

Notwithstanding these reflections, I believe the data I gleaned from all the different methods allows me to add insight to the NEET debate through the experience of this one cohort: one group of young people on the brink of adulthood.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have set out my research design, including my aims, methodological perspective, methods of collecting data and analytical tools. In doing so I have framed the boundaries of my study and its conclusions. The results and findings of this study are particular to the circumstances and context from which they were gathered. However, in the next chapters, where I present the findings and then explicitly analyse these data in depth, I believe the insights offer an addition to debates around NEETness, at risk of NEETness and young people's transitions to adulthood.



## Chapter 5 Findings

### Introduction

Presenting the findings from a mixed methods case study is challenging. There are many types of mixed methods, some of which use one method to guide the decision of the complementary method. For example, a questionnaire may be used to gather views of a subject and be followed up with interviews. My collection of my data as part of a collaborative study has been explained in Chapter 4 and is noted as quan → QUAL, after Johnson and Onweugbuzie (2004). However, presenting the findings of all my data posed some considerations. Quantitative data is traditionally presented in one chapter and discussed in another; qualitative data is on the whole presented, discussed and analysed in tandem. I decided that as the voice of the young people was paramount, I would present my data by separating it in to two distinct chapters. The first contains the findings from the quantitative data and detailed extracts from the qualitative data and the second contains the analysis of the data in relation to SCT and other relevant literature.

### Section 1 Questionnaire results and analysis

The questionnaire was administered to one cohort of pupils in one school, once a year, over a period of four years from 2010 to 2014. An attrition graph (Figure 10) is included in Chapter 4. I have created Table 7, below, to illustrate the composition of the different groups that I will be referring to in this chapter. In essence, this table explains the makeup of the four years collection of data, and then the makeup of the groups who answered the questionnaire when they were in both Years 9 and 10, in Years 9, 10 and 11 and in Years 9, 10, 11 and 12. For example: In Year 9, 222 pupils completed the questionnaire, of whom 127 (57%) were boys and 95 (43%) were girls, 136 (61%) did not receive free school meals and 86 (39%) did. The group also contained 147 (66%) who were considered at a low risk of becoming NEET, 52 (23%) who were considered at medium risk of becoming NEET and 23 (10%) who were considered high risk of becoming NEET. I am unable to comment about the characterises of those pupils who did not complete the questionnaire as I did not have access to their pupil information, in accordance with the procedures put in place to protect anonymity. The following tables refer to these groups and the first table (Table 7) gives basic information as a reference point.

Table 7

*Numbers of participants in specific groups*

Participants in each group by number and percentage	Boys	Girls	Yes FSM	No FSM	LOW RISK As identified by RONI	MED RISK As identified by RONI	HIGH RISK As identified by RONI
Year 9 (n=222)	127 57%	95 43%	86 39%	136 61%	147 66%	52 23%	23 10%
Year 10 (n= 228)	126 55%	102 45%	96 42%	132 58%	155 68%	51 22%	22 10%
Year 11 (n=190)	113 59%	77 41%	86 45%	104 55%	129 68%	42 22%	19 10%
Year 12 (n=86)	45 52%	41 48%	54 63%	32 37%	61 71%	21 24%	4 5%
Matched data: Years 9 & 10 (n=175)	96 55%	79 45%	65 37%	110 63%	120 69%	39 22%	16 9%
Matched data: Years 9, 10 & 11 (n=119)	66 55%	53 45%	74 62%	45 38%	83 70%	24 20%	12 10%
Matched data: Years 9, 10, 11 & 12 (n=56)	27 48%	29 52%	34 61%	22 39%	37 66%	15 27%	4 7%

Figure 12, below, is a social stratification descriptor by jobs, based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ILO, 2008). I used this to decide the category of jobs the young people indicated that they wanted.

<b>Professional job</b> (e.g., manager, doctor, architect, teacher) lawyer, dentist, accountant, director, nurse...)
<b>Other office job</b> (e.g., secretary, clerk, typist, receptionist, civil service, and local government employee...)
<b>Senior government or public worker</b> (e.g., inspector, prison governor, customs officer, surveyor...)
<b>Store worker</b> (e.g., sales representative, shop salesperson...)
<b>Hands-on job requiring specialist training</b> (e.g., plumber, electrician, fitter, mechanic, foreman, bus driver or conductor, police officer, fire fighter, agricultural worker, chef/cook...)
<b>Job needing a small amount of training or experience to start</b> (e.g., hairdresser, beautician, taxi driver, caretaker, teaching or school assistant, childcare worker, nursery nurse...)
<b>Job needing no special training</b> (e.g., general labourer, casual worker, lorry driver, window cleaner, domestic cleaner, caterer, hotel or bar staff)
<b>Homemaker</b> (e.g., housewife, househusband)
<b>Unemployed</b>
<b>Don't know</b>

*Figure 12. Stratification of occupations (based on ILO, 2008)*

Table 8, below, shows the type of career these pupils aspire to. This relates to a question on the questionnaire that required the participants to say what career they would like. I added a category called ‘fame’ which is not a career as such, because some pupils expressed their desire to be famous in answer to this question.

Table 8

*Categories of careers that participants stated they wanted*

	Percentage of participants in Year 9	Percentage of participants in Year 10	Percentage of participants in Year 11
Professional job	55.7	57.9	65.4
Other office job	0.6	2.9	0.0
Senior government or public worker	0.6	0.6	0.0
Store worker	0.6	1.8	1.5
Hands on job with specialist training	10.2	8.2	12.0
Job with some training	6.3	5.8	5.3
Job with no training	0.6	0.0	0.8
Don't know	23.9	21.6	14.3
None of the above	1.1	0.6	0.8
Fame	0.6	0.6	0.0

Over half the young people said they want a professional job and the next largest category wanted a hands-on job with specialist training, whilst in Year 9, aged 14, 23.9 percent were not sure of their path. By Year 11, aged 16, this had decreased to 14.3 percent. Perhaps this is not surprising as at 16 the time to make career decisions is imminent. This is an illustration that the young people in this study, situated within a working-class area, do not appear to lack ambition. It may be the case that jobs that are more visible are more likely to be chosen. Professional jobs, for instance

teachers, doctors, dentists, journalists are more visible than, for example, laboratory technicians.

One of my research sub-questions is ‘How do pupils identified as at risk of becoming NEET see their future prospects for education work and life relative to pupils who are not identified as ‘at risk’ longitudinally across secondary school?’. The questionnaire design is explored in Chapter 4. There were seven questions asked each year. The response to the question was on a Likert scale with five possible responses: agreed lots (AL), agreed (A), neither agree or disagree (N), disagree (D), disagree lots (DL). Table 9 shows all the sub-groups of risk (low, medium and high) across three years when the pupils were in Years 9, 10 and 11, using data from only those pupils who answered the questionnaire in all three years. Comparisons across years for those in assigned risk groups, as well as between groups, is therefore possible.

Table 9

*Frequency Table of selected answers to questions*

Percentage of participants responding	Year 9/10/11 matched high risk (n=12)					Year 9/10/11 medium risk (n=24)					Year 9/10/11 low risk (n=83)				
	AL	A	N	D	DL	AL	A	N	D	DL	AL	A	N	D	DL
<b>I enjoy school</b>	8	83			8	8	75	13	4		12	70	10	7	
<b>In Year 9</b>															
<b>In Year 10</b>		75	17		8	13	63	25			6	74	15	5	15
<b>In Year 11</b>	17	33	50			21	54	21	4		4	71	18	4	
<b>My teachers like me</b>		67	25	8		13	46	42			5	52	36	7	
<b>In Year 9</b>															
<b>In Year 10</b>	25	50	25			13	42	42	4		5	51	36	5	4
<b>In Year 11</b>		42	58			21	58	21			17	62	16	5	
<b>I like my teachers</b>	8	42	50			8	42	46	4		6	46	36	10	1
<b>In Year 9</b>															
<b>In Year 10</b>		83	8	8		8	46	25	21		5	61	27	6	1
<b>In Year 11</b>	16	41	41			17	58	13	13		6	66	22	5	1
<b>At 16 I will stay on at school or college</b>	33	42	25			42	29	29			57	28	15		1
<b>In Year 9</b>															
<b>I don't really think about what I might be doing in a few years' time</b>	8	17	25	42	8	4	33	17	25	21	2	12	23	34	29
<b>In Year 10</b>															
<b>In Year 11</b>	17	17	17	50		4	8	17	38	33	4	10	19	45	23
<b>I will go to University</b>	8	42	42	8		33	42	13	13		49	27	21	1	1
<b>In Year 9</b>															
<b>In Year 10</b>	8	25	42	25		38	25	29		8	37	31	27	2	2
<b>In Year 11</b>		17	25	58		42	13	38	8		40	31	24	4	1
<b>I like all the subjects I study at school</b>	18	46	18	18		13	44	26	13	4	10	37	25	26	3
<b>In Year 9</b>															
<b>I like learning</b>	17	67	8		8	25	63	13			21	64	12	4	
<b>In Year 10</b>															
<b>In Year 11</b>	17	67	8		8	29	67	4			29	57	12	1	
<b>I have a good relationship with my parents/carers</b>	91		9			67	21	13			78	16	7		
<b>In Year 9</b>															
<b>In Year 10</b>	82	18				58	29	13			57	35	7		
<b>In Year 11</b>	75	25				58	42				68	27	5		

Of those that gave a response to the statement in Year 11, 'I will go to University', seven chose the response 'disagree', whereas in Year 9, only one chose this answer and in Year 10, three chose this answer. There appears to be a marginal trend towards less positive answers in some questions. However, it is noteworthy that a positive response in all years was given for parental relationships; there is a great amount of consensus within groups and across time which seems to show the opposite of common opinion, that teenagers are at odds with their parents. The same is true of the statements: 'I like my teachers' and 'I like learning'. This is a small sample, however, it does show that attributing negative attitudes to some aspects of school and learning, to some pupils with specific characteristics, may not always be founded in fact.

To investigate if there were any differences between groups or over time with regard to pupils' positive attitudes to school and learning, I created a variable from answers given to the first seven questions. If a pupil answered a positive statement by indicating they 'agreed lots', they were scored 1 and 'agreed' was scored 2 and so on until 'disagreed lots' was scored 5. A reverse formula was used if a pupil answered a negative statement by 'agreeing lots', a score of 5 was given. These scores were entered in SPSS. I then created another variable which calculated a mean average of the scores for each year group. This will be referred to as a positive attitude score, followed by the year it relates to, for example, 'positive attitude score, Year 9'. The lower the mean value, the higher the positive attitude.

In the tests presented below I was investigating if there were a statistically significant difference between the means in two unrelated groups. I therefore chose independent t tests to help me consider this possibility.

#### *Comparison of positive score and free school meals*

I ran a series of t-tests. An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the positive attitude score of pupils who were in receipt of free school meals and those who were not. Being in receipt of free school meals is cited as a risk factor of a young person becoming NEET (see Chapter 2).

Results for Year 11 pupils in receipt of FSM (n=80) and those that were not (n=100) show that there are no significant differences in scores for those in receipt of FSM:  $M=1.99$ ,  $SD.416$  and for those not in receipt of FSM,  $M=2.03$ ,  $SD .497$ ;  $t(178)=.694$ ,  $p=.488$ .

Results for Year 10 pupils who were in receipt of free school meals (n=92) and those that were not (n=129) show that there are no significant differences in scores for those in receipt of FSM:  $M=2.16$ ,  $SD.478$  and those not receiving FSM:  $M=2.12$ ;  $SD.444$ ;  $t(219)=.673$ ;  $p=.501$ .

Results for Year 9 pupils who were in receipt of free school meals (n=79) and those who were not (n=123) show that there are no significant differences in scores for those in receipt of FSM:  $M=2.12$ ,  $SD.417$  and those not receiving FSM:  $M=2.11$ ;  $SD.480$ ;  $t(200)=.110$ ;  $p=.913$ .

Results for Year 12 pupils who were in receipt of free school meals (n=28) and those that were not in receipt of FSM (n=46) show that there are no significant differences in scores for those in receipt of FSM:  $M=2.04$ ;  $SD.537$  and those not in receipt of FSM:  $M=1.89$ ;  $SD.527$ ;  $t(72)=.1175$ ;  $p=.244$ .

#### *Comparison of positive score and gender*

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the positive attitude score by year by gender, since being male is cited as a risk factor of a young person becoming NEET (see Chapter 2).

Results for Year 9: (male n=116) and female (n=86) show that there are no significant differences in scores associated with gender:  $M=2.11$ ,  $SD.490$  and female  $M=2.11$ ;  $SD .406$ ;  $t(200)=.005$ ;  $p=.997$ .

Results for Year 10: (male n=123) and female (n=98) show that there are no significant differences in scores associated with gender:  $M=2.18$ ;  $SD.440$ ; and female  $M=2.10$ ;  $SD .472$ ;  $t(219)=1.104$ ;  $p=.271$ .



Results for Year 11: (male  $n=108$ ) and female ( $n=72$ ) show that there are no significant differences in scores associated with gender:  $M=2.00$ ;  $SD.456$ ; and female  $M=2.40$ ;  $SD.472$ ;  $t(178)=-.742$ ;  $p=.459$ .

Results for Year 12: (male  $n=39$ ) and female ( $n=35$ ) show that there are no significant differences in scores associated with gender:  $M=1.98$ ;  $SD.573$ ; and female  $M=1.91$ ;  $SD.488$ ;  $t(72)=-.512$ ;  $p=.610$ .

#### *Comparison of positive scores and High Risk of NEET group and Intervention Group*

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the positive attitude score for each year. In Year 11 I compared pupils by high risk of NEET and in the Intervention Class ( $n=9$ ) and pupils at high risk of NEET but not in the Intervention Class ( $n=10$ ). There are no significant differences in scores associated with being in the Intervention Class  $M=2.29$ ;  $SD.319$ ; or not:  $M=2.46$ ;  $SD.307$ ;  $t(17)=1.192$ ;  $p=.250$

In Year 10 I compared pupils by high risk of NEET and in the Intervention Class ( $n=9$ ) and high risk of NEET but not in the Intervention Group ( $n=12$ ). There are no significant differences in scores associated with being in the Intervention Class:  $M=2.40$ ;  $SD.473$ ; or not:  $M=2.30$ ;  $SD.461$ ;  $t(19)=-.405$ ;  $p=.690$ .

In Year 9 I compared pupils by high risk of NEET and in the Intervention Group ( $n=7$ ) and high risk of NEET but not in the Intervention Group ( $n=13$ ). There are no significant differences in scores associated with being in the Intervention Group:  $M=2.16$ ;  $SD.210$ ; or not:  $M=2.32$ ;  $SD .478$ ;  $t(18)=-.812$ ;  $p=.428$ .

#### *Positive attitude*

I conducted a one sample t test for each year group to ascertain if the positive attitude score was significantly different from what might be considered the population norm of 3. The population norm of 3 was derived from the possibility of answering all the questions as neither agree or disagree, i.e., the middle point of the Likert Scale. The scoring system in place was such that the lower the mean the higher the positivity.

In Year 12 (n=77)  $T=(75) 17.51$ ;  $p=.0005$ . The positive score was significantly lower by a mean of 1.12, 95%  $CI (1.12-.94)$  than the presumed population mean of 3.

In Year 11 (n=184)  $T=(182) 28.94$ ;  $p=.0005$ . The positive score was significantly lower by a mean of 1.05, 95%  $CI (1.05-.92)$  than the presumed population mean of 3.

In Year 10 (n=222)  $T=(220) = 27.97$ ;  $p=.0005$ . The positive score was significantly lower by a mean of 0.92, 95%  $CI (.92-.80)$  than the presumed population mean of 3.

In Year 9 (n=203)  $T=(201) 27.71$ ;  $p=.0005$  the positive score was significantly lower by a mean of 0.89, 95%  $CI (.82-.95)$  than the presumed population mean of 3.

These tests indicate that all year groups were more positive than expected.

#### *Positive score compared with at risk of NEET group*

The one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) is used to determine whether there are any statistically significant differences between the means of three or more independent (unrelated) groups. I predicted that there could be a difference in the positive attitude score between the low, medium and high risk of becoming NEET groups. As is shown by the results of the tests below, this was not proved.

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to determine if positive scores in Year 9 were different for groups who were assigned to different risk of NEET groups. Participants were classified as low risk (n=135) medium risk (n=47) or high risk (n=20). There is not a significant difference at the  $p<.05$  level in positive attitude score for the three at risk groups:  $F(2,199)=2.3$ ;  $p=.102$ ; High ( $M=2.27$ ;  $SD=.40$ ); Medium ( $M=2.17$ ;  $SD=.40$ ) and Low ( $M=2.07$ ;  $SD=.47$ ).

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to determine if positive scores in Year 10 were different for groups who were assigned to different risk of NEET groups. Participants were classified as low risk (n=149) medium risk (n=52) or high risk (n=21). There is not a significant difference at the  $p<.05$  level in positive attitude score for the three at-risk groups:  $F(2,219)=2.2$ ;  $p=.116$ ; High ( $M=2.33$ ,  $SD=.46$ ); Medium ( $M=2.15$   $SD=.47$ ); Low ( $M=2.1$ ,  $SD=.45$ ).

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to determine if positive scores in Year 11 were different for groups who were assigned to different risk of NEET groups. Participants were classified as low risk (n=122) medium risk (n=40) or high risk (n=18). There is a significant difference at the  $p<.05$  level in positive attitude score for the three at risk groups  $F(2,177)=7.58$ ;  $p=.001$ . High ( $M=2.39$ ;  $SD=.32$ ), Medium ( $M=2.04$ ;  $SD=.545$ ) and Low ( $M=1.95$ ;  $SD=.426$ ). The high group differed from the medium and low groups but low and medium did not differ from each other significantly. However, the *post hoc* test shows that the effect size is very small at 0.07 using Tukey.

Overall, my findings from these tests do not show substantial statistically significant differences between groups<sup>17</sup>. These tests and raw frequencies do suggest that these pupils in this study are positive about their school experiences, their future and their relationship with their parents. This is important information. These pupils were assigned to a high risk of becoming NEET group, a medium risk of becoming NEET group and a low risk of becoming NEET group using the RONI previously described that includes negative scoring for FSM. My tests do not indicate a statistical difference of positive attitude between pupils who receive FSM and those who do not. Gender is a recognised risk factor but one that was not included in the RONI and in this study male and female pupils do not show significantly different positive attitude scores. These findings in a small way challenge the conception of major differences between groups.

Against this background, qualitative data from focus groups and observational data offer a way forward to understanding the lived experiences and aspirations of these pupils.

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<sup>17</sup> The data were tested for normality and I was satisfied that the distribution of accumulated scores and positive scores were reasonably 'normal'. In addition, I chose to test characteristics separately as the combination of characteristics and the positive score reduced the number of cases to an unacceptably low level for it to be tested with any accuracy. The one-way ANOVA tests were carried out with high, low and medium risk groups, which by this definition combined characteristics of group members in ways which produced numbers amenable to statistical analysis.

## Section 2: Focus groups, the findings

This section addresses the research question: How do pupils attending school-led interventions designed to mitigate their risk of becoming NEET talk about their futures, prospects for work, education, and life relative to those not identified as at risk? The data used are taken from the focus groups which were discussed in Chapter 4. I describe the context in which the group interviews took place. I then describe the major codes that arose from my thematic examination of the spoken words within the groups. The codes are derived from categories, each of which is presented in turn and discussed. These categories were the second stage of my six-staged approach to thematic analysis, the codes were the third stage and the findings chapter is the fourth stage (see Figures 11 and 13 for detail). I take each in turn and, through excerpts from the different groups, I explore the differences and similarities between them. In this way, I am moving my raw data from description to an analytical framework. This leads me to interpret my findings in relation to the overarching theoretical frameworks which are discussed in Chapter 6. I have chosen to present my data in this way and share the process through the stages in order to enhance the reliability and validity of this study through the transparency of my thinking, analysing and interpreting. All the names of the participants and facilitators are pseudonyms.

### Contextual information on the focus groups

#### The Boys' Intervention Group

This focus group, which consisted of boys who were in the Intervention Group, took place in a classroom. The boys sat in friendship groups, John, Tony and Reg sat around one table, Steve, Richard, David and Callum sat around another table and Bob and Mark sat around a third table. I sat in the middle of the classroom. I had met these boys before as I had been present in some of the Interventions sessions as a participant observer. I had chatted informally with some of them in the classes. They were at ease with me. They knew my name and I had explained previously that I was undertaking research on young people's experience of school and that their opinion was very important to me. The group on the whole were keen to answer the questions, although at times Tony, Reg and Alan were 'mucking about', kicking each other under the table and giggling, at which point I switched from 'researcher' to 'teacher' mode and told them if they continued then they would have to leave. In

response, they tried really hard to behave and maintained a level of engagement that was acceptable. The other boys appeared to be undeterred by their behaviour. Some of the answers given to some of the questions were met with derision by other pupils. I highlight these occasions in the text.

### The Girls' Intervention Group

This focus group consisted of nine girls who were in the Girls' Intervention Group. It took place in a classroom. The girls sat on one side of the classroom facing inwards in a line with the tables in front of them. I sat on the other side of the tables. The girls' names were Rosie, Karen, Helen, Kim, Beth, Katie, Dawn, Linda and Louise. I had met these girls before and chatted to them informally. They were very keen to help. Katie and Dawn were quiet and had to be encouraged to take part in the discussion; I often had to ask them questions directly. Rosie, Karen and Helen were more talkative, however, overall this group gave monosyllabic answers to questions and strayed significantly from the topic. They wanted to talk about TV soaps and shows like *The X Factor*. It was difficult to keep them on track.

### The Boys' Non-Intervention Group

This group of boys was chosen by the school. They were all in the same Physical Education (PE) class and were asked if they would mind missing PE to talk to me. In addition, some who were unable to take part in PE that day through illness or injury had opted to talk to me. I had not met any of these boys before. I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the focus group and the research. I then asked them to introduce themselves. Their names were Luke, Andrew, Harry, Charlie, Tim, Matt, Roy, Alan and Liam. This focus group took place in a classroom. We moved the chairs to the centre of the room and the boys sat in a semi-circle. I sat in the middle, facing them. Some were more vocal than others: Andrew, Harry and Charlie were dominant voices, whereas Tim needed constant encouragement to speak. They were all very polite and interested in each other's answers.

### The Girls' Non-Intervention Group

This group of girls was chosen by the school and, like the boys, they were all in the same PE class and they were asked if they would mind missing PE to talk to me. They had just been asked as they were getting ready for PE and consequently had

their PE kits on. The focus group took place in a room behind the Girls' Changing Room used for team talks and technical instruction. There was one long table with chairs. The girls sat in a line and I sat in front of them. I introduced myself and explained the purpose of the focus group and the research. I then asked them to introduce themselves. Their names were Linda, Vicki, Terri, May, Emma, Sue, Sharon, Tracy and Sarah. These girls were very upbeat and generally cheerful. They occasionally talked over each other but in a very friendly, non-threatening, non-confrontational way.

In the following excerpts I have reproduced the spoken words of the young people, however, some caution should be applied. In this group situation it is entirely possible that once one young person used a phrase (for example, "School makes us...", or expressed an opinion, such as that school's purpose "is to gain qualifications" or the use of I will) other young people in the group will follow this pattern. I have reproduced these quotes thematically and not necessarily in the order in which they were said; the quotes were selected from the wider group conversations. Therefore, I believe that whilst some repetition of phrases may be present, the excerpts do show the individuality of the young people and their feelings, experiences of school and their hopes and dreams.

### School purpose

This discussion arose through the responses to the question, "What do you think school is for?". This question was asked in all the groups, as discussed in the previous section. As a question to 15-year olds it may appear straightforward; as a question in general it has far-reaching connotations, as it could be construed as needing to be addressed within a political framework or an epistemological framework; it could be answered sociologically or psychologically; it could be answered from many people's points of view, including teachers, employers and parents, to name but a few. However, for this research it is the young people's voice that is at the forefront. Accordingly, my discussion follows from their consideration of the question and highlights the uniformity and variance of their experience, as voiced by the young people themselves, between, for example, those pupils deemed to be 'at risk' of becoming NEET and those deemed not 'at risk', both girls and boys.

Four different aspects of school were talked about. These were:

- School as an entity: many participants saw school as an entity doing something to them. For example, many participants talked about school as, “helping us with our future”, “helping us succeed” or “making us stand on our own two feet”.
- Learning skills: these may have been soft, for example, honesty, and/or transferable, for example, to “work in a team”, or more specifically, “to get qualifications”. No participants spoke about any particular subject-related skills.
- Economic aspects: some participants said the purpose of school was to, “get a job”. Others spoke about the need to be able to get jobs in order to, “pay taxes to help the government” and to “build a better future for your country”.
- Social aspects of school: for example, “It’s where you make friends”, “It’s good for socialising”.

These four aspects are presented separately below for ease of reference; in the raw data these elements are mingled.

### School as an entity

It would appear that school for these young people is ‘something’, a body that gives you positive attributes. These boys describe school as a positive thing which will help them on the road to their future but in a way that implies that they will take charge. Below is an excerpt from the discussion in the Boys’ Intervention Group:

John: ...*School makes us stand on our own two feet.*

Tony: ...*makes us independent*

Reg: ...*makes us successful*

Whilst participants in the Girls’ Intervention Group articulated their sense of school differently, it would appear that the girls are more passively accepting this as help towards directing them to their future rather than school teaching them to be independent, asserting their own futures.

Katie: ...*School helps us.*

Karen: ...*School helps us with our futures.*

Helen: ...*School helps us gain confidence.*

This idea of being assisted also featured in the Girls' Non-Intervention Group in phrases such as:

Linda: ...*School gives people an education.*

Vicki: ...*a future...*

Terri: ...*School helps us to communicate.*

School is spoken of here as an abstract; it does something to you almost without your input, the young people are passive receivers of knowledge, skills and futures.

Learning skills: the skills young people thought school had taught them

The Boys' Non-Intervention Group framed many of their answers to the question "What is school for?" around gaining skills. These were mostly soft skills:

Andrew: ...*the purpose of school is to teach you punctuality*

Charlie: ...*maybe honesty...*

Andrew: ...*daily routines and to build skills you need for life.*

Facilitator: ... *Daily routines?*

Andrew: ... *getting here on time, breaks, work, wearing the right clothes, that kinda thing.*

The Girls' Non-Intervention Group comments were:

Emma: ...*the purpose of school is to teach you to work in teams...*

Sue: ...*gain knowledge.*

These comments were all non-subject-specific and very general.

In contrast, participants in both the Girls' and Boys' Intervention Groups talked about the purpose of school being to gain qualifications.

Rosie: ...*to get GCSEs*

Karen: ...*to help get exams*

Cullum: ...*to pass exams*

David: ...*to get qualifications*

This difference appears to be between the need to succeed in the here and now and acquiring skills which could be useful and transferable in the future.



Economic aspects: how school/education is associated with economic benefit  
In both the Girls' Intervention Group and Girls' Non-Intervention Group, the girls spoke about how school might help them get jobs. However, whilst the Intervention Group made comments like:

Kim: ...*School helps you get a job.*

Karen: ...*School helps you find work.*

the Girls' Non-Intervention Group showed a deeper sense of the economic function of school, as this exchange illustrates:

May: ...*I think the purpose of school and education is to build a better future for your country, the country you live in, to get a job so you can pay taxes to help the government do the things it needs to do.*

Emma: ...*Well, yeah, but not too much tax, we'll have to pay our loans off!*  
(laughs)

These comments illustrate that the girls have made a connection between school and their future lives and how they fit into the bigger picture. Neither boys' group (Boys' Intervention and Boys' Non-Intervention Groups) mentioned that school might help them or that it did help them get jobs.

### Social aspects; school as a social place

In all four focus groups many young people said that the purpose of school was to make friends and socialise and have fun. This involved meeting in school at break times and lunch and trying to sit together in classes. For the boys in the Boys' Intervention Group, fun was in class as well as out, they spoke about incidents of what they described as 'messaging around' in class.

Bob ...*sometimes you can have a laugh with a teacher.*

Facilitator ...*with a teacher?*

Bob: ...*well you can talk to your friends, go on your phone... some teachers let you, to help each other.*

This messaging around was described as fun, something you did with your friends.

The girls in the Girls' Non-Intervention Group spoke about meeting in the library primarily to work.

Tracy: ...*I think school is also about meeting your friends and helping each other...we meet in the library sometimes*

Sharon: ...*yes ...we also talk about Hollyoaks.* (The girls all laugh)

They spoke about how this was important for them; it made them feel good to have friends that they could talk to, work with, and ask for help if they were stuck on homework or work in class.

### School reality

This code captures some of the actual experiences of school, as discussed by the young people. There is some cross-over with other codes: school purpose; expectations; and anxiety. However, this exploration gives some insight into the actual events that may then account for other less tangible feelings and attitudes towards school and learning. Government policy regarding the school curriculum and league tables influences the curriculum decisions and allocation of resources in the school. 'School reality' emerged as a code through the participants' contributions to the general conversations about what school was like on a day-to-day basis. This code emerged from the categories 'fairness', 'teachers', and 'the reality of preparation'.

- Fairness: this refers to pupils' perceived experience of (un)fairness in the school system and how this was expressed by the participants in terms of their prospects;
- Teachers: this refers to how teachers were perceived as good, bad, indifferent, hard-working and under pressure, and how these perceptions influenced how participants felt about their learning experience;
- Reality of preparation: this refers to the link in some pupils' minds that *what* is taught is important. This often took the form of criticising the relevance of subjects for their future prospects, for example, "What's the point of maths; it's only any good if you want to be an engineer or something". Or it took the form of identifying practical skills, for example, completing CVs.

## Fairness

The word “fairness” was used to describe various situations. For example, in the Boys’ Non-Intervention group they discussed the unfairness of the school’s setting system and how it affected their science GCSE choices.

Harry: ... *some people don’t get to do Triple Science ’cos like in our school only Set One does Triple Science which is kinda unfair ’cos other people in other sets may want to or aspire to something bigger than the teacher [expects]. Yeah, YOU don’t get to do this. Just one GCSE, but some universities just want three GCSEs in Triple Science, but you don’t get to do it. I wish we could do three rather than just allocated. I am in Set Two.*

In contrast, in the Boys’ Intervention Group, pupils were concerned about the unfairness of their treatment by teachers.

John: ...*When I was moved up a set for Maths the teacher kept asking me to answer the questions... He was picking on me and ’cos I didn’t know the answers, ’cos I had only just gone into that set, he made me look thick. My mum had to come up [to the school] and get it sorted. I asked to be moved back down, I was better there.*

Matt: ...*Some teachers are always telling you to stop talking, even when you’re talking about the work, they don’t believe you and if you’ve got a good reason for not doing your homework, your internet won’t work or somethink, they have a go at you.*

Roy: ...*Or worse, you’ve done it but it’s not good enough!* [rolling his eyes and shaking his head]

These young men appear to be questioning how the school rules and decisions out of their control restrict and limit their futures.

## The role of teachers

The role of teachers was commented on in all the groups. For example, the Girls’ Non-Intervention Group spoke of teachers as being;

Emma: ... *good*

Sarah: ... *helpful*

Terri: ... *nice*

Sue: ... *hardworking*

Emma: ... *Yeah, they are but it is up to us, you, me to do well. Teachers can only do so much.*

In the Girls' Intervention Group, the comments were all similar.

Rosie... *I like all my teachers, they are very kind.*

In the Boys' Intervention Group teachers were spoken about in a more critical way.

Bob: ... *they're always talking too fast.*

Mark: ... *yes, going too fast, you can't keep up.*

These teachers aroused anxiety in these pupils about being left behind.

There was some discussion of how teachers dealt with behaviour issues. Some teachers were described as, for example:

Reg: ... *too soft, they can't really control the class*

This was said in quite a derogatory fashion.

In this discussion about the curriculum, the Boys' Non-Intervention Group spoke about teachers' stress.

Facilitator: ...*Are there subjects that you would like to study but are unable to?"*

Harry: ...*Yeah, like Spanish. They used to do it but the teacher under-achieved and so they stopped it.*

Charlie: ...*Teachers get into trouble if we don't pass our GCSEs... especially like Maths... and that's why I think we get the worst or new teachers in the bottom sets: we're not gonna get Cs anyway, top sets get better teachers. I don't blame them, not if you could lose your job.*

Steve: ...*they are well stressed.*

David: ...*teachers are under a lot of pressure.*

Whilst there is an air of sympathy for the teachers, a lot of responsibility is placed on them. This is a discussion between three boys in the Boys' Non-Intervention Group:

Alan: ... [A teacher's job is] ...*to get them through.*

Luke: ...*to try hard* [and to deliver] ...*good, interesting lessons.*

Andrew: ... *Yeah, but you can't really control the child or student when they're in the exam. Hello, you can teach them to a certain extent but it's up to that student to actually, actually do well in exams.*

Luke: ... *Well, yeah, but if the teacher doesn't put in 100, well his maximum effort, then why should the student put in his maximum effort if he's not going to get half out of it, so it should really be a balance between student and teacher and none of them should give more than the other. It should be an equal balance, teachers and students should work together.*

Alan: ... *the teacher like starts you and then you finish.*

The role of teachers is important to these young people, they rely on them to impose the right level of discipline, do a good job, to give them or help them get the right skills to move them forward. Yet there is an air of frustration with the system which seems to give those that need the best teachers, the worst teachers, and puts stress on all teachers.

### Reality of preparation

This arose from comments about how well-prepared young people felt for the future and to go on to study or work. For many this involved speaking about the usefulness of subjects that were studied. Many talked about subjects they liked, others spoke about subjects they did not like, mathematics was singled out.

The Boys' Intervention Group talked about school subjects as follows:

John: ...*most subjects are easy, in History, you read something, learn something, about the war like, then we talk about it and watch films.*

Tony: ... *I think Shakespeare is alright. Miss explained how we still say things that he invented like "eaten me out of 'ouse and 'ome". Pretty sick.*

David: ... *I like Maths, it's taught me to be logical.*

Bob: ... *Maths is boring*

Richard: ... *What's the point of isosceles triangles?*

Bob: ...*What if you don't want to do anything with maths, you say goodbye to it after GCSE, and teachers do prioritise it... a lot.*

Reg: ... *none are gonna help you in a job unless you gonna use it, what you gonna use RE for - being a vicar* [everybody laughs].

Bob: ... *Things like CV writing, that would be better.*

Richard: ... *Work experience, things like that.*

The Boys' Non-Intervention Group was enthusiastic about some subjects:

Roy: ...*Maths is important but unless you are going to be an engineer or something you don't need all that stuff.*

Harry: ...*I like Science, we get to know, like, about planets, animals, plants, how things work, you know.*

Liam: ...*In Maths they teach you all these things which you won't use unless you get a mathematical job.*

The Girls' Intervention Group spoke about subjects as follows:

Karen: ... *English is just reading really and talking about what they meant.*

Kim: ... *Maths won't really help you, just your bills and stuff, but everybody needs to be able to read and write. Every job is gonna need English.*

The Girls' Non-Intervention Group talked about subjects they liked and disliked, but they clearly saw and articulated the transferability of school subjects. They spoke about how a broad knowledge of seemingly disconnected subjects could help them make decisions about their future lives and future study.

Linda: ...*I like English, even the poetry bits.*

Emma: ...*French will be useful for holidays.*

Sue: ... *Maths is hard.*

Linda: ...*Algebra! What's that about?*

Emma: ... *Maths is boring.*

Linda: ...*But really you learn how to study.*

Emma: ...*Yes, you have to look things up.*

Sue: ...*It's about just getting on with it.*

Terri: ...*Subjects don't really matter. It's about knowing how to learn how to find things out and working hard, that's what's important.*

A chorus: ...*Yes, that's right.*

This idea of transferable skills is prominent in schools and one some of the young people seem to appreciate. It is noteworthy that the subjects that are liked by individuals are the ones that they feel they can achieve in. Mathematics for the most part is seen as boring, hard and not useful in the real world. This view may reflect prominent social discourses surrounding mathematics, i.e., to some extent it may be a learned response. If so, it is no less important for this study, as I was seeking to understand the participants' points of view. Participants in the Intervention Groups appear to want what they perceive as more practical subjects that have obvious applications, notwithstanding the applicability of mathematics, as perceived by the school and by this researcher. Also, Reg's derogatory comment regarding RE could have, at least in part, been made in response to his withdrawal from RE to take part in the Interventions, which, it could be argued, were promoted as more important than RE by the Senior Management Team.

### Expectations

For the most part, this code developed through responses to the question: 'Where do you see yourself in ten years' time?'. There were four categories:

- Jobs and careers - this is an exploration of what job or career the participants stated as their chosen path;
- Relationships - participants' statements on their future relationship status;
- Measures of success - this describes the material items the participants aspire to possess by the time they were 26;
- Place - this refers to actual residential areas and the wider concept of identity formation.

### Jobs and career choice

Choosing a career is a complex process. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), a development of SCT presented in Chapter 3, explains how many elements are connected to the seemingly individual choices that are taken. I will now use it to illuminate my discussion of the comments from the young people. SCCT shows a complex web of interconnecting influences that are not linear and that lead to choices regarding careers. One of the elements that comes to the fore within the focus groups is gender, although within the quantitative data in this research (see Chapter 5) no

significant difference by gender was noted. Poole and Low (1985) argue that career choices are influenced by gender role socialisation and as this is the earliest form of socialisation its influence is powerful. This was further endorsed by McMahon and Patton (1997) who found the intensity of this socialisation can lead to a limited, gender-based range of career options. I would also argue that class and perceived identity influence expectations. Both gender and identity differences are evident below.

All the members of the Boys' Intervention Group except one voiced ambitions to follow a practical career. They wanted to be:

Cullum: ...*a plumber.*

Tony: ...*a PCO.*

Steve: ...*join the Army.*

or pursue a career that relied on a perceived talent:

Bob: ...*skate boarding pro.*

Mark: ... *a writer.*

John: ...*a Formula One driver.*

Interestingly, they were the only group that expressed an idea of how a job should be something you enjoy.

Bob: ...*A job's gotta be something you enjoy.*

Cullum: ...*I think you should have fun.*

Steve: ...*I think doing lots of different things in your job is good, like, variety like.*

Me: ...How do you become a plumber or...?

Nobody answered except Tony:

Tony: ...*There is a course you can do at college called a Uniformed Public Service course. I am hoping to get in at Level 2 if I get OK grades for my GCSEs.*

The other boys raised their heads and eyebrows in a gesture that I would describe as bemusement or maybe grudging approval and admiration. They did not add anything more or want to talk about their steps towards their career paths.



The Girls' Intervention Group were, for the most part, vague about their future plans. They said for example:

Rosie: ...*I want to work with children*

Beth: ...*I think I will work in an office*

Louise: ...*become a model*

Facilitator: ... *What kind of qualification do you need? Do you know which colleges offer courses in...?*

Beth: ...*I think I will be good in an office. I don't know what sort of qualification you need. I guess IT and English...*

Louise: ... *you just get spotted or you have to get pictures done.*

They did not have clear pathways or short-term or long-term goals. This was in stark contrast to the Girls' Non-Intervention Group who all, except one, wanted to and expected to go to university to become primary school teachers; research has shown that working-class bright girls often have this ambition (Sharpe, 1994).

Facilitator: ...*How do you become a primary school teacher?*

Sharon: ... *I need to get good grades in my GCSEs. At least a C in Maths and English. I need three A levels at least Cs, then I will go to university and get a degree, probably in English, and then do a year's teacher training, um, a PGCE, then I can teach as a ...*

Emma interjects: ... *an NQT*

Sharon: ... *yeah... phew!*

Another girl in this group had an equally well thought-through plan, albeit a less academic route to her goal.

May: ... *I am not going to Uni, and getting into loads of debt. Lots of people go and still can't get jobs. I am going to go to college and study Beauty and Business Studies and then I am going to set up my own business. I can do mobile beauty and then when I have saved some money get a shop. My Uncle owns some businesses and he will help... invest in me, like.*

They were very clear about the stages needed to reach their chosen careers. They were setting goals, planning their futures and taking charge of their destiny.

Although Emma was anxious about getting the required C grade in her Mathematics GCSE, however, she was quite prepared to re-sit the exam again and again to fulfil her goal.

Emma: ...*I am a bit worried about getting a C in maths, you have to have it.*

Facilitator: ...*What will you do if you don't get a C?*

Emma: ... *I will just keep going 'till I do, I can re-sit it here while I do my A levels. I am going to try really hard to get it first, but I will get it.*

The boys in the Boys' Non-Intervention Group aspired to careers that required degrees and additional training. Of interest here is the use of the phrase 'I will...', not 'I want to...'.

Harry: ... *I will go to university and train to be a Doctor.*

Tim: ...*I will be an architect.*

Andrew: ...*I will be a sports commentator.*

Roy: ...*I will be a lawyer.*

These boys have clear goals and ambitions. Only one boy wanted to work in construction, but he was the son of a successful builder who owned his own company. He had made a choice based on his observation of his father's success.

## Relationships

For all the girls, their future in ten years' time included long term relationships:

Rosie: ... *I want to be married.*

Karen: ...*Yeah, or at least engaged.*

For some, being a Mum was important:

Sharon: ...*I definitely want to be a mum by then, married of course.*

Sue: ...*Yeah, I'd like to be married and a mum too.*

The boys in both focus groups did not see themselves in committed relationships.

Bob: ...*I'm not gonna be married or anything like that.*

Luke: ...*no way I want fun...*

Although some, including Harry, did say they hoped to have girlfriends.

This difference between the girls and boys may be explained by prevailing attitudes towards marriage and motherhood reinforced by socialisation.

### Measures of success

This arose from the answers indicating what these young people think they will have in terms of success by the time they are 26. Many, across all the groups, spoke about having a good salary. When I asked what a good salary was the responses were all between £25,000 and £30,000. This is an interesting figure as at the time £26,000 was reported as the average annual take home pay and this figure was being used to support welfare reforms and the new benefit cap (ONS, 2016). This may have filtered through to the young people via news reports or conversations they had heard.

All the groups spoke about wanting;

Karen: ... *nice house*.

Reg: ...*a nice car*.

Linda: ... *holiday once a year*.

All expressed an idea of comfortable living, for example,

Matt: ...*a comfortable life*.

Cullum: ...*I want to have enough money to live a comfortable life, not rich, just enough to not worry*.

David: ...*I want to have a normal life*.

Harry: ...*I want the same as everybody else here, house, car, holidays, to be able to go out when I want to, to be able to afford things*.

Charlie: ...*I want a to be happy in my job, a nice girlfriend and enjoy life*.

Emma: ...*I see myself as a primary school teacher, hopefully married, maybe one kid, living near my family*.

Noteworthy is how these statements all appear to be set within a sense of what is normal and comfortable, not fantastical, and that they believe this comfortable life is achievable.

## Place and identity

Where the young people wanted to live differed across the groups. Most of the Girls' Intervention Group and the Boys' Non-Intervention Group wanted to,

Karen: *...live somewhere else.*

Beth: *...not here.*

or as Harry expressed it:

Harry: *anywhere else.*

However, the Girls' Non-Intervention Group all expressed a desire to stay where they lived now:

May: *...I think I will live here.*

Linda: *...My family live here, So here.*

Emma: *...Maybe Dubai or here. I have family in both places.*

The Boys' Intervention Group were not concerned about where they lived, they just wanted it to be:

Reg: *...wherever.*

Cullum: *...I don't really care.*

Reg: *...Never thought about it.*

David: *...a normal place.*

Where a person resides and where they want to live can indicate how settled they feel but also this might indicate how stuck they feel and how they cannot control this aspect of their life.

## Anxiety

This code arose from an examination of the data and direct and indirect references to stress, anxiety, concern, security and feeling overwhelmed. There are two categories:

- Stress of school now; this label was applied to the imminent stress of examinations, coursework, and dealing with school on a day-to-day basis;
- Concerns about the future: this refers to concerns and worries about the future.

## Stress at school

All the groups expressed some anxiety about approaching examinations. All the groups used the words “anxiety” and “stress” or “stressing” with reference to school examinations.

Emma: ... *I am anxious because we are starting our GCSE exams next week but there are loads of revision sessions we can come to, it's just everything feels a bit much.*

Sue: ...*I have made a study plan but still it's stress.*

David: ...*I'm going to all the revisions sessions.*

For others an air of resignation to their fate was apparent. In the Boys' Intervention Group many knew they were expected by the school to get less than a C grade in Mathematics but with bravado declared:

Mark: ...*it doesn't matter, I could take it again next year and maybe get a better teacher.*

Richard: ...*It's no big deal.*

All the groups agreed that school was more serious in Years 10 and 11:

Linda: ...*in Year 10 school got more serious and now it's really serious*

Tim: ...*It's scary serious now*

Rosie: ...*School like has got more important*

For some, school was “harder” in Years 10 and 11. Some lamented the change from earlier years in school:

Charlie: ...*The GCSEs are hard and before them I enjoyed school*

Bob: ...*I really loved school in Primary and I was much better at things*

The groups differed in their concerns regarding coursework. For the most part both girls' groups preferred coursework elements of assessments and both boys' groups preferred examinations.

Luke: ... *[exams] are just done and over with. Coursework, it's boring and you have to keep doing it and improving it!*

However, it was the boys' groups who used the words "stress", "stressing", "stress out", with reference to the rules of school. In the Boys' Non-Intervention Group, they spoke about teachers being preoccupied with school uniform rules, for example:

Harry: ... *they spend a lot of time stressing with how long your tie is or if you've got your blazer on.*

The Boys' Intervention Group were stressed over the rules regarding behaviour and attendance. They expressed this as;

John: ...*if you're sick you're sick, you can't help it but then they all get involved and tell you 'you can't have time off' .... makes you sicker.*

Facilitator: *All?*

John: ...*Yeah, teachers, parents, your tutor, Mr A....*

Reg: ...*You get stress from teachers. Some teachers really shout at you for nothing and they're scary*

This could indicate some level of disaffection or disjoint between the ethos of school and what these boys wanted to gain from school and what they thought they should be allowed to do.

### Anxiety about the future

Anxiety about the future was present in all the groups. They all expressed concerns about how they would find jobs. The Girls' Non-Intervention Group were concerned about the affordability of university, although this did not seem to dampen their enthusiasm for going.

Emma: ...*I am going to university although I am a bit scared of the money.*

Linda: ...*I am gonna stay at home and go to a local university.*

Terri: ...*I have looked into going abroad where the fees are not as high.*

Linda: ...*You don't pay it back for ages.*

Vicki: ...*Your parents have to help. I will stay at home and not go away whilst I am at Uni. My parents are happy for me to do this rather than get in more debt.*

Emma: ...*And we will be working...*

Sue: ...*I want be a teacher so I've got to go so that's it.*

For the Boys' Non-Intervention Group, their anxiety was concentrated on the security of jobs they may have in the future. They said:

Harry: *...security is important in a job, especially if you have a family.*

Liam: *...for me a [I want a] job where you don't worry about the bills.*

Andrew: *...You need a job that you won't be let down in, like one week you got work and then the next week you ain't.*

They did have some strategies for keeping themselves in work. David spoke about how keeping a job was dependent on:

David: *...becoming a specialist in something.*

Matt had a strategy;

Matt: *...to stay in a job you have to make sure you are ahead by learning new things.*

The young people are in the process of making choices and appear to be weighing up their options and how they can take charge of their own destinies.

### Othering

This is an examination of how participants define themselves as belonging to a group or how they distance themselves from other groups. Othering is a term used in sociology and psychology to describe how individuals and groups internalise their identity within society through their cultural (or ethnic) identities, gender identities, class identities and how these social categories shape our ideas about who we think we are, who we think we are not, and how we want to be seen by others. This otherness presented itself in two interrelated stances, positioning and distancing. Positioning describes how participants position themselves as belonging to one group as opposed to another, distancing explores the conditions when a participant is trying to distance themselves from a course of action or behaviour (Brons, 2015).

In all the boys' groups there were remarks made about other groups within the school. The boys spoke about;

Tony: *...Some boys muck about.*

Harry: *...Some youths cause trouble.*

This implies that they see themselves as part of another group, one that does not cause trouble or muck about. They appear to be defining themselves by what they are not. They spoke about how they were generally well behaved, and they blamed any misdemeanours on unfair treatment from teachers. They protested that *they* were not badly behaved.

Tony: *...I come to school every day and mostly I get on.*

Richard: *...I might talk a bit but I do the work.*

Bob: *...Some teachers want you to shut up **all** the time.*

Harry: *...Some kids take it too far.*

Tony: *... some kids muck about. They will end up like a carrot. They could save themselves by getting a job.*

As noted above, the Intervention Groups did not know that they had been identified as potential NEETs. They were told that they were receiving help to enhance their chances of getting good GCSEs and help to decide what they might like to do on the future. In conversations within the focus groups they would talk about those they knew who had no jobs. They referred to them as “losers” and said:

David: *...I would take any job to get a start.*

Tony: *...I won't be hanging about causing trouble.*

The implication was that ‘I am not like those young unemployed people. I will be, I am, better. I have the tools to be better, I need to be better’.

In this section I have presented data to exemplify what was expressed in the focus groups. The codes emerged through a thematic analysis of the verbatim record of these groups. I have chosen to share this important stage before I move on to in-depth analysis and emerging themes to ensure the voice of the young people is at the forefront of this research. In the next section I present selected data from the intervention sessions that I observed.

### Section 3: The story of the interventions.

In this section I explore the data gathered from my participant observation of the Intervention Class. In doing so I am addressing the research question: How do pupils engage with school-led interventions designed to mitigate their perceived risk of becoming NEET?



I begin by describing the contexts, setting and aims of the intervention classes. I will then give a detailed account of selected interactions between pupils and facilitators; following this I will offer some comments. I did not observe all the sessions and I will not be describing all the sessions here. I have chosen to describe and explain some observations in detail. These were chosen as they contain interactions that help to illustrate the young people's experience within school: their behaviour; the type of interventions they were subject to; and the process of goal setting. In other sessions that I observed the young people were working on coursework individually or on computers searching for career information, all without incident. As explained in Chapter 4, these sessions were not audio-recorded and the speech reported is not verbatim. However, I made copious notes and often the exchanges between pupil and teacher were one-to-one and therefore I was able to note down what was said with a high degree of accuracy. These observations have been chosen as illustrative examples of the content of the interventions and the young people's behaviour.

These accounts are from my participant observation of the Intervention Class that took place over a two-year period with a group of pupils who were deemed by the school to be at risk of becoming NEET. They were selected as previously described in Chapter 4. These sessions were held once a week for an hour. They were described to the parents and participating pupils as an opportunity to: complete coursework; prepare for exams; prepare for employment; and to receive careers information. These sessions were overseen or led by a teacher in the school. For the first academic year (2011-2012) Mr A. was timetabled for this hour and in the second academic year Mr B. was timetabled for this hour. During the two years different activities were organised; some involved outside agencies. It is not my intention here to evaluate the interventions, rather to describe the pupils' reactions and experiences within the Intervention Class as I observed them. What did they say, how did they behave, what might this mean or indicate in relation to the focus of this study?

### Introduction to City Hopes

In the summer of 2010, the school was directly approached by a charity organisation called City Hopes (a pseudonym). City Hopes is a youth project designed to engage, motivate and enable young people aged 14 to 19 to stay in education, employment or

training. It works with many schools in different Local Authorities. The City Hopes programme consists of tailored activities, mentoring support, skills training, financial and social incentives, and health, fitness and outdoor activities. They work with young people referred to them by any organisation, primarily those who are deemed to be at risk of dropping out of education. The school decided to take up City Hope's offer to run some sessions for the Intervention Class. The school's Careers Coordinator contacted City Hopes and they were able to offer a programme that included whole class group work and individual mentoring over a six-week period. I observed three sessions of the total of six.

#### Observation of a lesson entitled 'Ambition and success'

This first account is of a group session facilitated by a young woman called Jay (pseudonym). The group consisted of 18 pupils all of whom had been identified as at risk of becoming NEET. The session took place in the school Library. The room is larger than the average classroom and most of its walls are lined with bookshelves. There are numerous tables with computers stations. There is a large projection screen at the far end and lecture-type chairs arranged in a circle. There is a room at the back which has been designated the Careers Office. It contains books, leaflets and brochures on careers, colleges and universities.

The pupils drift into the class. Each one is greeted by Jay who says: "*Good morning. How has your day been so far?*". Some of the pupils are bemused by this, others answer by saying "I'm fine" or "I'm bored". Jay replies to these comments and seeks further clarification.

Bob: *I'm fine.*

Jay: *Why are you fine?*

Bob: *I just am.*

Jay: *Has something good happened today to make you feel fine?*

Bob: *Well, It's not raining, I wasn't late, and nobody has shouted at me yet.*

Jay: *A good start then.*

Others make negative comments:

Reg: *I'm bored.*

Jay: *Why are you bored?*

Reg: *School is boring.*

Jay: *School is about **your** future, school is where you learn great stuff, you need to be more positive.*

The pupils gradually find seats at the tables and, whilst there is some noise and chatting, their behaviour is acceptable.

Jay introduces the session's topic: ambition and success. She gives out a combined worksheet and evaluation form. It consists of three parts. The first part asks for some personal information (name, age, school) followed by a list of statements for example: 'I know what I would like to do when I leave school'; 'I have set myself goals for the next two years'. The instructions ask for the pupils to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 to what extent they agree or disagree with each statement. The second part of the worksheet has some fictional scenarios of young people's lives and the third part is a repeat of the statements which is to be completed after the lesson.

Jay explains the worksheet and says: "When you fill in the statements a second time at the end of the lesson, your scores will be higher".

The pupils are given the combined evaluation and worksheet. Six pupils ask for pens. Jay gives out pens and comments: "How have you managed to do any work today without a pen? You need to be prepared for school and take some responsibility for your learning".

Once everybody has a pen most pupils fill in Part One. However, some have difficulty reading and writing. Jay tries to help those struggling. The level of noise raises to what would be an unacceptable level in a normal class. Mr A., who has been in the Careers Room at the back of the Library comes out and walks about. Instantly the noise level reduces. I surmise that this may be because he is a respected senior member of the school staff, whereas Jay is regarded as a visitor with little authority. Mr A. goes back into his room.

The second part of the worksheet consist of scenarios of young people's lives and suggested points to discuss. For example, the first scenario states:

James wants to become a hairdresser, but he has applied to college and has been turned down as he does not have a GCSE in maths. What should he do next? List at least three options and prepare to discuss why you think these options are good.

Jay, the facilitator, introduces the scenario and asks, “Can I have a volunteer to read the first scenario out loud please? I want someone who doesn’t normally do reading aloud. What about you Steve?”.

Steve reads the scenario out awkwardly and stumbles on some words. When he is finished the rest of the class clap somewhat sarcastically.

*Jay: Yes, you do deserve a clap. It is hard to do things you find difficult but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try.*

She invites discussion and suggestions regarding the scenario.

*Bob: If he hasn't got it by now chances are he won't. He should give up.*

*Richard: Do something else.*

*Jay: Maybe he could but he does have a goal. Perhaps he should stick to his goal. What do other people think? Can I remind you that your answers need to be in sentences? Thank you.*

*David: He should get his maths and re-apply.*

*Jay: Can you expand?*

*David: Well, I don't know how he would do it. If he's still at school, he could ask the careers teacher I s'pose.*

*Jay: Yes, perhaps that would be a starting point. He could go to someone and get more information.*

*Beth: He should get a Saturday job sweeping.*

*Jay: Can you explain a bit more?*

*Beth: He could get a job sweeping up the hair and if he shows he is good, turns up on time, looks smart, they might keep him on.*

The class for the most part is taking part and Jay makes sure all contributions are validated and valued. She continually makes comments for example: “That’s an interesting point, can you say more?”.

Other scenarios are examined in the same vein. Jay uses questions and the pupils' answers to explain the connection between ambition, goal setting and achievement success. She then asks the pupils: "What do you think success looks like?"

Bob: *If you are rich you are a success, have a big house, a nice car.*

Jay: *Success is yours, what you value.*

Jay: *Do you think I am successful?*

Richard: *You look the part, you have nice clothes and a job.*

Jay: *Yes, but I never thought I would help children. I wanted to be an air stewardess, but my Dad said I wasn't pretty enough.*

There is an audible cry of shock.

Reg: *That's harsh.*

Jay: *Ambition and your goals are yours. There will always be people trying to put you down but if you really want something you must persevere. Of course, your ambitions change as you get older. I realised that I wanted to go to university. I am successful, but I took another path. It's OK to change your mind but you must have goals and if you don't know what you want to do, a good goal would be to get the best GCSEs you can.*

At the end of the session the pupils fill in Part Three of the sheet. Jay asks each one to say what they have gained from the session. If the pupil gives a vague answer she stays with them until they have given a reasonable answer.

Rosie: *You have to have a goal.*

Jay: *Why is it important to have a goal?*

Rosie: *Because otherwise you won't get anywhere.*

Jay: *What is your goal?*

Rosie: *Um, I think I want to work with children.*

Jay: *So what will you do to make that happen?*

Rosie: *Go to the Careers Fair and find out.*

Every pupil is expected to - and does - give positive answers. This goes some way to reinforce the object of the session.

## My session

As previously explained, I have worked in education for many years within a range of settings and age groups. In many RONIs under-achievement in Mathematics and English is flagged up as a risk factor. As I have taught both numeracy and English, I developed a short programme to re-engage these young people in the functional aspects of these subjects. In this session I used daily newspapers to stimulate discussion. The aims were: to select items of interest; to explore how statistics are used in newspapers; and to contribute to discussion. I had previously taught a similar session in Functional Skills classes to adults and young people aged 16 and over.

The session took place in the school Library, as previously described. I started the session by explaining the aims and asking the pupils to form groups of between three and five and choose three articles: one that used statistics; one of human interest; and one about someone famous.

As the class began to settle down and begin work a teacher arrived at the Library with her class and explained that she had booked the Library for this period. I said: “Oh, this is normally where we meet”. The teacher accessed the schedule on the computer and showed me the timetable with her booking indicated. She and I looked at other available rooms and found an unused computer room. I informed the group that we needed to move.

Many groaned and made more noise than necessary, packing up their books and papers. One boy Mark was really angry;

Mark: *Why can't she move? We're always here.*

Me: *Well, yes, but it's my fault. I didn't know there was booking system for the Library and now I do I can make sure that it's booked from now on. It won't take a minute to move.*

Mark: *No, it's not right, it's crap. I'm not moving.*

He was shouting angrily, and the other teacher was moving towards him just as Mr A. came out of the Careers Room. Mark became increasingly angry and shouted: “Yeah, we don't count, move us anywhere. It's rubbish”. He started throwing books about.

Mr A. quietly approached Mark and said in a calm manner: “Calm down and come into the office, where we can talk”. Mark went with him to the Careers Office. The rest of us moved classroom.

Other pupils muttered their agreement with Mark.

Richard: *Yes, he's right. We can move. We aren't in the top set of English.*

Beth: *We don't need the Library. We can start our lesson again.*

Thirty minutes had passed by the time we relocated. I gave the pupils a chance to talk with me about the incident. Some expressed their feelings:

David: *Oh well, that's Mark. He flies off the handle.*

Bob: *Well he had a point. We are moved about. Why us?*

Most of the pupils did not want to talk about it and just wanted to get back to the task. We resumed the task. All the groups took it in turn to talk about one article they found while other groups listened and commented. Mr A. arrived towards the end of the session and praised the class for their behaviour and engagement. In doing so he reinforced the ‘right’ way to behave. Even though many may have felt aggrieved, they did not act out.

## Mentoring 1

Mentoring pupils was part of the interventions offered by City Hopes. The pupils saw the mentor six times in six weeks for approximately 15 minutes each time. They discussed their aims and ambitions. The mentor helped them to set goals and provided them with information and leads.

The following is an excerpt from the second meeting between Jerry (the mentor) and Louise, a 15-year-old girl in the Intervention Class.

Jerry: *OK, so last time we spoke you told me you would like to work in the fashion industry. Since then I have found some interesting courses that seem good. I have a contact number for you. This college runs embroidery short courses for kids 14 to 19. The school can pay if you apply for discretionary funds. Is that something you would be interested in?*

Louise: *I don't know [if] I'm interested in fashion.*

Jerry: *Well, think about it. It might also be useful if you learnt a language. Many fashion houses are in Paris and Milan.*

Louise: *I'm no good at languages.*

Jerry: *Well, it may have been the way you were taught. You should try another way, language would be a good skill. What other things could you do outside of school to help you get into fashion?*

Louise: *I don't know. I bunk off school a lot.*

Jerry: *Why do you bunk off? If you had a job you couldn't just decide not to turn up. You would get the sack.*

Louise: *Yeah, but school hates me and I hate youth workers coming to my house and making me go to lessons.*

Jerry: *Why do they do that?*

Louise: *Because I get drunk.*

Jerry: *Why?*

Louise: *I'm just stupid*

Jerry: *There are people to help you. People you can talk to. Look, there are people in the fashion industry with no qualifications but it's your future. You can do something for yourself. Put the past behind you and do something. Look up these opportunities on the internet and next week we can talk some more*<sup>18</sup>. This example indicates how difficult it can be for an outsider to appreciate all that is behind a pupil's disengagement with school. Louise clearly has multiple issues and problems that appear to be beyond her control.

## Mentoring 2

This is the second meeting between Jerry and John, a 15-year-old boy in the Intervention Class.

John: *I want to be a Formula One driver.*

Jerry: *Yes, we talked about that last week and we talked a bit about a Plan B. You want to have your own car salesroom.*

John: *Yep.*

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Any safeguarding issues that arose were followed up by the mentor and dealt with through the school's procedures so Louise's remark will have been followed up. Pupils are aware that reporting - 'telling' - is important and that all staff have a duty of care towards them.



Jerry: *So what about going to a car showroom and asking if you help out, look and learn?*

John: *Yep, I suppose I could do that but who would I ask? I don't know anybody, I don't know any showrooms. I want to go to college and do up cars, but my maths is terrible, but I am getting extra help.*

Jerry: *Perhaps you could apply for an apprenticeship.*

John: *Yep, maybe but I really want to be a Formula One driver.*

This represents a situation that can be problematic; a young person has an ambition, a dream, however, the reality of the situation is that their preferred outcome is unlikely. John is not a junior karting expert and it seems unlikely that he could achieve his dream job.

### Mentoring 3

This is an extract from the first mentoring meeting between Jerry and Dawn.

Jerry: *So you would like to work with animals...*

Dawn: *Yes, I am going to college to study about animals, looking after them, dogs mainly.*

Jerry: *Do you have a Plan B in case that doesn't work out.* [Jerry's says this really quietly to match Dawn's whisper]

Dawn: *No.* [as she says this she stares ahead]

Jerry: *Well, it's always a good idea to have a Plan B.*

Dawn: *No. I am going to college to work with animals. I did my work experience at the dogs' home and now I am going every Wednesday.*

Jerry: *Oh well, that's good. Who arranged that?*

Dawn: *I did. Mr A. said if I wanted to do it I had to ask my parents, the dogs' home, and my teachers if I could.*

Jerry: *I see.*

Dawn: *So I did and I am. Can I go now?*

Dawn shows clear goal setting, confidence and determination. In these mentoring conversations the young people were encouraged to plan their futures by setting small goals and having a Plan B. These sessions highlight that these young people do have aspirations but whilst some display directed self-agency others do not.

Mentoring is often used as an intervention with young people deemed at risk of NEETness or disengagement (Meier, 2008, p.5), as was the case here. However, the Rowntree Foundation reports (Carter-Wall & Whitfield 2012; Goodman & Gregg eds, 2010; Kintrea, St. Clair & Houston, 2011) found there was inconclusive evidence of mentoring having a significant impact on children's motivation. The three sessions described illustrate the dichotomy between individual young people's lives and the solutions sought to help them.

## Modelling

Simon is part of the City Hopes team. The class takes place in what was once one long large classroom that has been converted into three spaces. This means that to get to the end classroom one has to walk through two others. This class takes place in the middle room.

Simon explains that he will teach the pupils a technique called mind mapping to help them remember things.

Simon: *Has anyone got lots of posters in their bedrooms or photos?*

A few put their hands up. Simon chooses Tony.

Tony: *I have a lot, I am into Star Wars.*

Simon: *OK, so really concentrate and describe your posters,*

Tony: *I've got Princess Leia, Yoda, Darth Vader*

Simon: *OK, let's really see what you have on your wall. Come up and draw on the whiteboard your wall.*

Tony hesitates: *Not sure what you mean.*

Simon: *This is your wall* [Simon spreads his arms out towards the whiteboard] *draw the posters rough, where they are, what's on them.*

Tony starts to reproduce his wall.

Simon: *OK. Here are some colours. Put them on. Don't forget the stand-out words. Are they all the same size?*

This does not take very long and the rest of the pupils are making comments.

Reg: *Jeez, he's got a lot of posters.*

Linda: *I can't believe he knows them all.*

Simon: *You see that every day and look at the detail you can remember because they are vivid and graphic. This is also a way to learn things for exams, to aid your memory.*

Simon splits the pupils into groups of three and four and asks them to read about the functions of the heart.

Simon: *So now I want you to make a poster of the functions of the heart, make it stand out, use colour, graphics. You all have to work on it, not just one or two in the group, all of you. You can't be looking at your phone whilst others do the work, staring out the window, thinking about lunch.* [Simon acts out how they might do this] *You all need to contribute. Go.*

He presents an authoritative, albeit fun figure, unlike other facilitators, maybe because he is male and tall. During this task another set of pupils walks through the classroom to get to Class 3. Simon starts to clap as they walk through. The pupils look shocked at first but join in. This would be unusual behaviour for a teacher and by doing this he sets himself apart from the teachers.

The pupils complete the task and each group gives a presentation. All the presentations have followed the brief. The pupils seem really engaged and enthusiastic. Simon takes all the presentations away and then asks the group questions about the heart. For the most part all the questions are answered correctly first time and if not, Simon stays with the pupil and gives them clues. The pupils leave this session looking happy, lifted. It has been a good experience.

### Charity apprenticeships

A charity that encourages young people to apply for apprenticeships ran a six-week course with the pupils. The sessions consisted of a discussion on what prospective employers valued in employees, cv writing and interview skills. The facilitator was a woman, Lesley, who had worked in industry as a trainer for many years. I observed six sessions.

### The cv-writing session

These sessions were IT-based. I observed the first of these sessions. All the pupils were given a password to access a cv-writing platform. The site was interactive. The pupils completed a questionnaire regarding their expected exam results, the qualifications they already had and their personal qualities. From this a simple cv was generated. There were many examples and interactive help. Lesley circulated, giving help as needed or requested. The cv writing was of mixed success. Some (Katie, Dawn, Louise, Reg and Steve) struggled with basic computer skills and struggled to complete the task online. Overall the pupils were engaged with the task. However, Bob, Richard and Tony started to misbehave. They were talking across the room, throwing pens to each other and generally mucking about.

*Lesley: Now boys, have you finished your cvs?*

*Bob: I've already got a cv at home. It's a bit boring.*

*Lesley: cvs need to be updated constantly. Let's have a look at what you've done.*

As she comes over to Bob's computer it's clear he has been on the internet, not on the cv writing task.

*Bob: I 'ave done it, I 'ave, I was just looking at my emails.*

*Lesley: Come on concentrate. I don't want to have to tell Mr A. you were messing about.*

Behind her, Richard is trying to get something from Tony's hand in a boisterous manner. I intervene:

*Me: Really! Come on. OK. So one of you can sit over there and the other here.*

*They move and say: "It's not fair".*

They quieten down. Later when the session is nearly at the end, I speak to all three.

*Me: Look boys, why is it when Mr A. is about you behave? Lesley is here trying to help you. It's quite disrespectful.*

*Richard: Sorry miss.*

Me: *Why do you behave when Mr A. is here and not for us?*

Bob: *Well he shouts, and he is scary and he can give detention or isolation.*

Me: *What's isolation like, is it like Waterloo Road? (a popular TV programme set in a secondary school)*

Bob: *Well, it's really boring because you're there all by yourself, without your friends.*

Me: *Have you been in isolation?*

Bob: *Yeah, about 200 times*

Richard (laughing): *200 times! What?*

Bob: *Well, maybe not that much but a lot! Sorry miss.*

Me: *It's not me you need to apologise to really.*

As they leave the classroom, they all stop and apologise to Lesley.

This session highlights the complexity of relationships in school. By their own admission the boys behave well (or at least better) if they are scared or perhaps just annoyed by the consequences of poor behaviour.

### Interview

In this session the facilitator, Lesley, asks for some volunteers to act out some interview scenarios: one depicting a poor interview and the other a good interview. One of the boys, Reg, volunteers to be the interviewer and I am the interviewee. The point of the first interview is to do some things that would be less acceptable in an interview but not outrageously so, to show how small things can make a difference. I was therefore not making eye contact, not listening well and fidgeting. Reg played the bad interviewer: he asked bad questions. Below is a brief excerpt:

I arrive flustered

Me: *Oh, I'm sorry I am late. The bus didn't come and then I couldn't find the building, then the lift took forever...*

Reg: *OK, just sit down and let's get on. Why do you want this job?*

Me: *Well, it's close to where I live.*

Reg: *What experience do you have?*

Me: *Well, I, um, help at my Uncle's business. He has a market stall.*

Reg: *Yeah, yeah, whatever. Not really relevant is it. Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?*

Me: *I would like to be a manager or work in HR. I need to gain experience and progress. Take opportunities and any qualifications that I might need.*

Reg: *Well, this is just answering phones and stuff. Got any questions? No? Great. We'll let you know.*

The first time Reg seemed uninterested in the answers and said "Hurry up" and looked out the window. He was taking his role of bad interviewer seriously.

A discussion followed on what both parties could do differently.

Richard: *You should always be on time. Plan even if you're really early. It's better than being late.*

Beth: *Miss needs to sit better, like she cares.*

David: *Reg needs to stop looking at the floor and being rude.*

Kim: *Miss, you need to speak up.*

The scenario was run again, this time to illustrate a good interview. Below is an excerpt:

I arrive on time, shake Reg's hand and introduce myself.

Reg: *Welcome. So we are going to have a chat. As you know this job is for a receptionist. It is an apprentice role, full-time but with a day a week at college. So why are you interested in the job?*

Me: *I like admin. work, answering the phone, dealing with people and I want to take some qualifications.*

Reg: *Do you have any experience?*

Me: *I have just finished school, but I worked part-time for my uncle re-ordering stock. He has a market stall so I am used to dealing with customers and money. He also showed me how to do banking and keeping records.*

Reg: *That's good. Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?*

Me: *Well, hopefully I would pass my exams and progress. I think I would like eventually to work in HR.*

The class discuss the difference between the two interviews.

David: *He was better, seemed interested, like.*

Beth: *Miss gave better answers.*

Richard: *Yeah, but he would put you off.*

Lesley: *It would be unusual to get a rude interviewer, but you still need to be confident and give the best answers you can. Because Miss was late first time the interviewer might think there and then, "I am not going to employ this person and not be bothered". They were both very good, especially you, Reg.*

The class gives Reg a rapturous round of applause. He swings around the room, he does a victory lap, taking bows. The class are laughing, and Reg really enjoys the attention. Mr A., who watched the role play said "Well done, Reg. That was excellent!".

The exercise was as much about socially acceptable behaviour as it was about interview techniques. Reg played his role with skill. The rest of the class enjoyed this role playing. In groups of three they were set the task of each taking it in turns to be the interviewee, the interviewer, and an observer. Some groups struggled to start and needed help and one group of girls decided to talk about nail polish instead. However, the most notable observation was of Reg. He took his seat at the back of the classroom and was instantly disruptive. He refused to listen or work with the other members of his group. He was balancing on his chair in a dangerous manner and when he was asked to go outside he did so but not before toppling a chair over in an act of defiance. Mr A. took him outside, but his bad behaviour escalated, and he was escorted to the Head Teacher.

Interventions – How did the participants perceive them?

In the focus groups attended by those who had participated in the interventions, I asked the pupils how they felt about being in the group and how they felt about the activities they were offered. The class was known to parents and pupils as "Careers

Preparation". This was considered necessary to prevent negative connotations and to avoid stigmatising the pupils. All the pupils were very positive about all the sessions. There should be some caution attached to this as this may be a result of the pupils wanting to please the facilitator or me (I was also present and led some of the sessions). That said, I had spoken informally to the participants on numerous occasions and observed their participation in many of the intervention sessions and my genuine perception was that for the most part they had enjoyed the sessions.

The girls and boys all made comments that expressed their enjoyment,

Bob: *It was fun!*

Beth: *It was good.*

Reg: *The interview session was fun.*

They all made positive comments about the facilitators. Simon was singled out for praise. He was said to be:

Bob: *Inspirational.*

David: *Funny.*

Cullum: *Not like a teacher.*

Tony: *Imaginative.*

This contrasts with some of the comments made previously about teachers, where teachers were described as being under pressure and unimaginative.

Some participants focused on particular sessions in their comments.

Tony: *Simon when he did the mind mapping was fun and it might be useful.*

David: *I liked the sessions on cv-writing and the interview techniques. It was useful and good preparation, like.*

Steve: *The one-to-one sessions with Jerry was a good way of finding out the next steps to take.*

Interestingly, many spoke of the sessions as:



David: *A good opportunity.*

Beth: *We're lucky to have been chosen.*

Cullum: *Worthwhile.*

Many spoke about how other pupils in the school would benefit<sup>19</sup>:

David: *Everybody should do it.*

Beth: *All those in Year 10 and 11 should do it.*

Richard: *Everybody would benefit.*

These comments are all positive, in contrast with the comments made earlier in the focus groups regarding mainstream lessons described as boring or not really useful.

These selected observations serve to present the diverse elements of the interventions and the facilitators' approach to their work and their engagement with the participants. Furthermore, they demonstrate the impact of structural aspects in situations that then affect the behaviour of the young people and *vice versa*. The presentation of these data shows practical examples of this interconnection. They illustrate how the young people cope or do not cope with the context and content of the sessions and the incidents that occur along the way. Their actions are influenced by and create the situations in which these observations took place.

In the figure below (Figure 13) I have summed up this information. I have described and explained the six-stage coding process within Chapter 4 and this figure illustrates the results of that process. It shows how the categories I began with became codes, and how by looking in depth at those codes I concluded there appeared to be a relationship between the young people's behaviour and elements which were not in their control and yet influenced their experiences. This led me to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Triadic Reciprocal Determinism and my themes of self-efficacy, agency in all its forms, environmental influences and behaviour.

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<sup>19</sup> The young people are speaking about the general benefits of the interventions. It may be the case that interview practice and cv writing is taught in other areas of the curriculum, however, I was not aware of such sessions.

Six stages of the Coding Process					
Data	Categories	Codes	Interpretation and analysis	Theoretical perspective	Themes to be discussed
Data collection and preparation of focus group data	School as an entity Economic aspects Learning skills Social Skills	School Purpose	How school life is entangled with outside influences and how school is interpreted, made sense of	<b>Bandura SCT/TRD</b>	The TRD Relationship in education and within the NEET discourse  Self-efficacy Agency in all forms Environmental influences Behaviour
	Fairness Teachers Reality of Preparation	School Reality	The degree of control over their futures; curriculum, teachers' efforts, usefulness of subjects		
	Jobs and careers Relationships Material success	Expectations	The amount of goal setting and planning Confidence in their future Gender/class issues Socialisation Opportunities		
	Stress at school Concerns about the future	Anxiety	Pressure from outside 'other' How to be make yourself secure		
	Positioning Distancing	Othering	Observation of others and decisions not to be like that. In control of their destiny		↑                      ↑                      ↑ Observations of interventions

Figure 13. The emotional aspects or learning and the behaviour and environmental influences

## Overall summary of findings

The quantitative data findings and tests found very few differences between the different groups and their ambitions and attitudes to school, this should not be dismissed as an unworthy finding. It is noteworthy as it contradicts many assumptions made with regard to young people's ambition and aspirations. The young people in the focus groups were forthcoming with their opinions, hopes and dreams. Some had more clearly thought-through plans than others. During the process of the coding of the focus groups and within the narrative accounts of the interventions I concluded that there were some differences amongst the young people in their level of confidence, goal setting, what influenced them, how they reacted to situations, who they relied upon for help and guidance, and how the school affected their everyday lives. The data presented here in Chapter 5 form the basis of my discussion in Chapter 6 which explores the connection between the data and the theoretical perspective of SCT and other relevant research.

## Chapter 6 Discussion

### Introduction

The interplay between the three elements of Social Cognitive Theory: environment; behaviour; and personal; is complex and it is difficult to separate the influence of the three elements. Accordingly, in this chapter I treat the elements separately in the first instance, while noting connections as appropriate. Alongside this, I also consider the significance of my findings in relation to the wider literature reviewed in Chapter 1 and referred to throughout this thesis.

In the first section of this chapter I discuss my quantitative findings in relation to the attitudes of the participants in my study, towards school. I then turn my attention to the qualitative data presented in detail in Chapter 5. The examples within that chapter represent the essence of all the data I collected, transcribed and coded; focussing especially on rich examples from the data. In this section I refer to these examples and descriptions to explore their meaning in relation to emergent themes of self-efficacy and agency through a lens of SCT and TRD.

Within the TRD model and my adaptation of it presented in Chapter 3 I discuss the environmental aspects which were evident in this data and were observed by me or spoken about by the participants and thus together form part of their experience. Following on from this I discuss evidence of emerging direct personal agency, using the voice of the participants in the four focus groups: Boys' Intervention Group; Girls' Intervention Group; Boys' Non-Intervention Group; and Girls' Non-Intervention Group. I analyse each focus group in turn for the presence of developed or underdeveloped characteristics of self-efficacy and agency and reflect on elements of proxy agency present in the data. I summarise the similarities and differences between the groups. I then turn my attention to the four components of self-efficacy and how these can be observed in the interventions, before bringing this chapter to a close by discussing human functioning more generally.

### Quantitative findings and discussion

The quantitative findings discussed in Chapter 5 show that the jobs the pupils wanted to pursue were overwhelmingly ones that required degrees or a high level of training.

They stated they wanted to be teachers, doctors, dentists and vets, which appears to suggest that these young people were ambitious. Whilst this should be welcomed it is unlikely that if they all succeeded they would all secure employment as the labour market could struggle to support that number of jobs (Atherton et al., 2009). These ambitions were not held by all the young people in Year 9, 23.9 percent of pupils answered, 'Don't know' to the question, 'What job would you like?'. Although this fell nine percentage points to 14.3 percent by Year 11 this still may indicate that many 16-year olds, as they enter 6<sup>th</sup> form or college, do not have a clear vision for their future.

In contrast to Croll (2009), in my study the number of the young people answering 'agree' or 'agree lots' to the question 'I will go to university' did not increase with time and remained consistently high throughout the three years (see Table 9). This should be viewed as a positive indicator of ambition. Furthermore, the positive attitude to school score for all pupils in each year group indicated that they were significantly more positive than might be expected. On this measure, the populist view of pupils disengaged with school is not upheld. Statistical tests revealed that there were no significant differences<sup>20</sup> between those deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET and those not deemed to be at risk with respect to their positive attitude to school. However, this result must consider the small number of young people deemed as high risk (n=12) who completed the questionnaire in Years 9, 10 and 11. There were also no significant differences between girls and boys, or between those who had free school meals and those who did not.

There was no significant difference between pupils who were identified as at high risk of becoming NEET and who were in the Intervention Class and those identified as at high risk but who were not in the Intervention Class. Although, again, the numbers in these comparative groups were small and these results should be treated with caution. This is in line with my other findings, which showed no differences between these groups. There were some descriptive differences in the mean scores over time which are highlighted in Chapter 5. This lack of significance is important.

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<sup>20</sup> The term 'significant difference' is used here in relation to the statistical tests carried out on this population. As the population was small (n=12), these results should be treated with caution and regarded as indicative rather than conclusive.

It may indicate that these groups are far closer in their ambitions, aims and aspirations than might be thought. It may also indicate that the mechanism for separating and classifying these groups is flawed. Conversely, this level of consensus may indicate that those pupils who attend school are aware of the messages within school and from outside school and respond accordingly. These results are subject to the limitations of the questionnaire and whole dataset which are explored in Chapter 5. These results from the quantitative data necessitated further investigation, and a qualitative approach enabled me to examine the real experiences of these groups in relation to their future prospects for work and life.

### Environmental factors

How do these young people see and experience environmental factors and how do they interact with their behaviour and ultimately their self-efficacy and agency? This is challenging to unpick because a specific experience is not free-standing but instead becomes part of an individual's whole lived experience. In this section I will take some elements and explore their presence in my data in a pragmatic way, illustrating how TRD sheds light on the experience of these young people as they describe it, regarding environmental factors. Environment in this instance comprises: macro elements, in that it could seem distant; meso elements, in that it could seem more local; or micro elements, in that it could seem near to their everyday lives (see Chapter 5, and in particular Figure 3 and Figure 6, for a more detailed explanation of elements within these categories (Pajares & Usher, 2008).

### Environmental economic aspects - a somewhat distant influence

In the focus groups there were discussions about the purpose of school. Those in the Non-Intervention Groups saw school as somewhere that transferable skills were acquired rather than as somewhere you learn particular things to pass examinations. There were differences between girls and boys. The Boys' Non-Intervention Group focused on individual skills or attributes such as, "honesty... punctuality and routines", while the Girls' Non-Intervention Group spoke of, "team-building and communication skills", attributes that are visible in a group setting. The focus for both the Intervention Groups was short-term goals: "to get GCSE... to pass exams". They tended to concentrate on the here and now, although in the long term they did

see school as something that would, "... help you get a job". In the Girls' Non-Intervention Group, the idea of schools being tied to the economy was expressed by May: "the purpose of school and education is to build a better future for your country". This could be interpreted as how environmental factors (i.e., 'big picture' macro elements) filter down to influence individuals' personal decisions, thoughts and beliefs. In the past, as discussed in Chapter 1, education, school and examination success were not thought of as being so neatly tied to the future economic success of the individual or the contribution to one's country's economic future. The Girls' Non-Intervention Group was very clear that school helps you to find jobs by giving you skills and the examination results you need. The boys in both the Intervention and Non-Intervention Groups did not talk about economic success in relation to school. Socialisation and the rise of women in the workforce may account for the girls' heightened sense of their need and desire to be economically independent. If so, this could be an example of a macro environmental influence.

Next, I look at some environmental influences which could be described as operating at the meso level. The subjects taught within the school featured in this research are largely dictated by the National Curriculum<sup>21</sup>, an example of a macro environmental factor (see Chapter 4, Figure 6), whilst in Key Stage 4 there are some decisions which are made locally (meso environmental factors). For example, Modern Foreign Languages must be taught but schools have a choice as to which ones are taught. Similarly, Science must be taught, however, school-level decisions still affect individual pupils' experience. For example, Harry explained how he experiences a school policy decision as unfair: "Some people don't get to do Triple Science ...only Set One does Triple Science". He continued "They used to do it [Spanish] but the teacher under-achieved". I cannot confirm that the school's decision to drop Spanish from the curriculum was due to a teacher's failure, but Harry is expressing his concern about what he sees as unfairness in the organisation of the school, with decisions made for him over which he has little control. A report on the lack of curriculum options in schools published by the Open Public Service Network (OPSN) and the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts Manufacturers and

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<sup>21</sup> The rise of academies, which are not mandated to follow the National Curriculum, may mean that its influence becomes less evident as time goes by.

Commerce (RSA) stated that: “The curriculum a pupil will be taught in an English school varies according to whether they live in a wealthy or poor neighbourhood” (Alldritt & Taylor, 2015, p.8). Harry’s experience may be an example of how decisions made by governments filter down to the personal aspects of pupils’ experiences. It may also be an example of Foucault’s (1977, *passim*) “docile bodies” as Harry and others negotiate their path but have no control over the curriculum. The pupils seem to be aware of how their performance can affect teachers. Those in the lower sets feel undervalued by the school as, in their opinion, they get the less able teachers. This perception is borne out by research conducted by Kelly, 2004, who concludes that “Teacher tracking matches the lowest performing students with teachers who are the least confident in their ability to enhance the students learning experience” (Kelly 2004, p.69).

How might this be connected to Harry’s future? Harry is in Set Two for Science; he has been placed in that set using criteria, including test results (a school environmental decision), which could stem from his personal traits and behaviour. Once in Set Two, he is unable to take Triple Science (a school environmental decision) and he knows this will be disadvantageous to him when applying to universities to become a doctor. The result could be that he may go to a different university and he may decide on a different career path. Hence, the connection between all three elements of TRD are illustrated by this example. Even with good direct personal agency and high self-efficacy, Harry could still be thwarted by environmental aspects outside his control.

Interactions between teachers and pupils can also be categorised as environmental influences and can have an impact on pupils’ self-efficacy and developing agency (Bandura, 1986). This was exemplified by the Boys’ Intervention Group members’ concern about the unfairness of their treatment by teachers. Teachers, “picked on them”, “made them look thick”, blamed them unjustly for “talking, not doing their homework right”. It is important to note that this is their perception of teachers’ behaviour; nevertheless, it is important as it may affect their behaviour and their perception of their abilities. This group saw unfairness in the treatment they received for their own behaviour, rather than unfairness in the system or organisation of the school. The unfairness they described was more immediate; they were describing



maybe a sense of rebelling, defiance, an unfairness because they did not fit in. A gender difference was apparent here in that no girl in either focus group talked about fairness. It may be that working-class girls are more passive, more oppressed, or perhaps they look to themselves for answers, not others, and are therefore more empowered, more focused.

A more immediate example of how the environment is influential is John's ambition to be a Formula One driver. This scenario is common whereby the ambition of a young person will probably be thwarted by their circumstances. It costs more than £1 million to become a Formula One driver, as many years are spent on go karting tracks, entering competitions and travelling widely. The environment of his personal, parental circumstances and lack of access to this lifestyle has a direct impact on the chances of success.

Another aspect of how these pupils interacted with the environment is the way they perceived school as a social place. In all four focus groups, many young people said that the purpose of school was to make friends and socialise and have fun. For some, fun was in class as well as out, mucking about, for example. For others, it was going to the library to help each other. Some young people were friends outside of school and met up at the weekend, whilst others were in contact through social media and still others just spoke at school. All these scenarios were present in all the groups; nothing stood out as different between the groups. Perhaps this is not surprising as many aspects of school - breaks, lunch, registration, sports and after school clubs - all give young people ample opportunity to interact with each other in a less formal way than in lessons. The importance placed upon the socialisation and the friendships in school was unsurprising, as for many adolescents peer groups take precedence over family. Members of peer groups seek validation through these friendships, which contribute to their positive self-perception (Bun Lam, McHale & Crouter, 2014; Brown & Bakken, 2011). The influence of this has been researched and it has been shown that a key part of adolescents' self-efficacy is connected to their friends and peer networks. Choosing friends that are like themselves develops the potential influence of modelling (Ryan, 2000). Chatting with friends often influences the choices one makes; often friends choose similar paths of action (Berndt & Keefe, 1992). Some of the participants appeared to be less

confident in their abilities since the transfer from primary school to secondary school. In research it was found that young people experience a decline in self-efficacy in adolescence if the classroom environment emphasises competition and performance rather than the personal goals of self-improvement and collaboration (Anderman et al., 1999; Anderman & Midgley, 1997; Urdan & Midgley, 2003; Urdan, Midgley & Anderman, 1998).

### Gender – an environmental influence?

The evidence from my study seems to indicate that there are differences between the boys and girls. The girls, both those in the Non-Intervention Group and those in the Intervention Group, appear to conform to an idea of gender-related stereotypical views of career choice. Whilst the gender one is, or aligns oneself with, is located in the personal aspects of TRD (see Chapter 4, Figures 3 and 6) gender stereotypes are the result of cultural environmental conditions and may have an impact on behaviour, including career choice (Bandura 2008).

Career choices for the girls appears to be influenced by their wish to combine motherhood and a career. My study was in a predominately working-class area and shows similarities with Sue Sharpe's two studies on working-class girls' expectations, (Sharpe 1972; 1994) which concludes that girls, "look forward to a future in which they are likely to end up juggling work and domestic life like their mothers before them" (Sharpe 1994, p 301). Even though my study was undertaken some 15 years later, this still appears to be the prevalent view amongst the girls. Eccles (1987) argued that career choice was influenced by the value placed on different activities and tasks. Perhaps the value placed on motherhood is still a strong determining factor on career choice for these girls. They all, regardless of whether they were deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET or not, aspired to stereotypical career paths and appeared to want to combine this with being wives and mothers. I cannot comment on whether this was because they were working class as I did not categorise the young people in my study by class, however, the school is in a deprived working-class area. The boys in my study also aspired to stereotypical careers, albeit some more practical in nature than others. The boys did not show a disregard for school as observed in Paul Willis's research with working-class boys in

his 1977 book, *Learning to Labour*, which highlighted how the 12 boys he studied over two years did not see school as a place to gain qualifications but as a place, “to have a larf.” (Willis, 1977, p.14). I did not witness this type of disregard for school in the boys (or girls) in my study. Some boys struggled to behave in a way acceptable to the school and some projected their success or otherwise away from themselves. Some queried the usefulness of subjects they were studying, and all the groups saw school as a social place, but not one of the boys or girls rejected school or the need to gain qualifications, neither did they lack ambition, even if their ambitions were somewhat unrealistic or vague or likely to be thwarted by limited opportunities, as discussed by Stahl (2012), whose study highlights the impact of neoliberalism on education and its consequences for working-class boys. Moreover, my research concurs with McKendrick et al (2007) who concluded young people did not reject education or school values, were optimistic and ambitious and held conventional views on education and life. This was evident in my research, with many of the young people, especially regarding what they hoped to achieve by the time they were 26.

My research revealed a somewhat mixed picture of gender and its influence on self-efficacy. Dawn, who was in the Girls’ Intervention Group, demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy and direct personal agency but, as will be discussed in the next section, she was atypical of this group. In general terms, the girls in the Non-Intervention Group and the boys in the Non-Intervention Group appeared to have higher self-efficacy and agency than those in the Intervention Groups. In other research, the link between self-efficacy and gender is not conclusive. Some found no differences (Pajares, 1996b; Roeser, Midgley & Urdan, 1996; Smith, Sinclair & Chapman, 2002). Moreover, whilst some researchers report gender differences in self efficacy in favour of adolescent boys (Anderman & Young, 1994; Meece & Jones, 1996; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1990), some report differences favouring girls (Britner & Pajares, 2001).

I contend that these young people are situated and influenced by the environment that surrounds them. However, I believe that they are unaware of this, perhaps this is not surprising, as they are 15. Their comments suggest, as Bauman (2001) contends, that they believe their futures are in their own hands, that they have to make the right

choices, do the right thing, perhaps with some help from those closest to them. Whilst some spoke about unfair treatment from teachers and or the school for example subject options their comments were, not directed at government policies. They distanced themselves from others who were not making the right choices and gave advice; as Tony states: ... “they could save themselves if they get a job”. These comments appear to concur with Bauman (2001) with regard to the move towards a more individualistic approach to securing jobs and live in general.

### Self-efficacy, agency and human functioning

Self-efficacy, human functioning, and agency sit within TRD and add to this complex theory. In this section I discuss the presence of self-efficacy and agency within the groups.

In the TRD model outlined in Chapter 3, two elements of agency and self-efficacy (intentionality and forethought) sit within the Personal and Behaviour categories and two, social persuasion and vicarious experiences, sit within Environment. All the elements are shaped by, and are shaping, the environment in which they take place; therefore, all aspects are entwined and interconnected. Whilst not denying the complexity and the intricacies of this relationship, a practical and useful way forward needs to be sought to begin to understand the real experiences of these young people on the brink of adulthood. My adaptation of Pajares and Usher’s (2008, p.401) model of Bandura’s TRD gives examples of the aspects contained in each category of Environment, Behaviour and Personal. In this section I analyse my data alongside explanations of the separate elements that build, represent and are present in agency, self-efficacy and human functioning.

I have constructed a dynamic model to illustrate the interconnection between agency, self-efficacy and human functioning (see Chapter 3 for a detailed explanation). This diagram, by its overlaying circles and arrows, indicates the interactions between all the elements. This diagram is derived from my earlier diagram depicting the relationship between the Environment, Behaviour and Personal elements present in Bandura’s (1986) TRD model (Chapter 4, Figure 5).

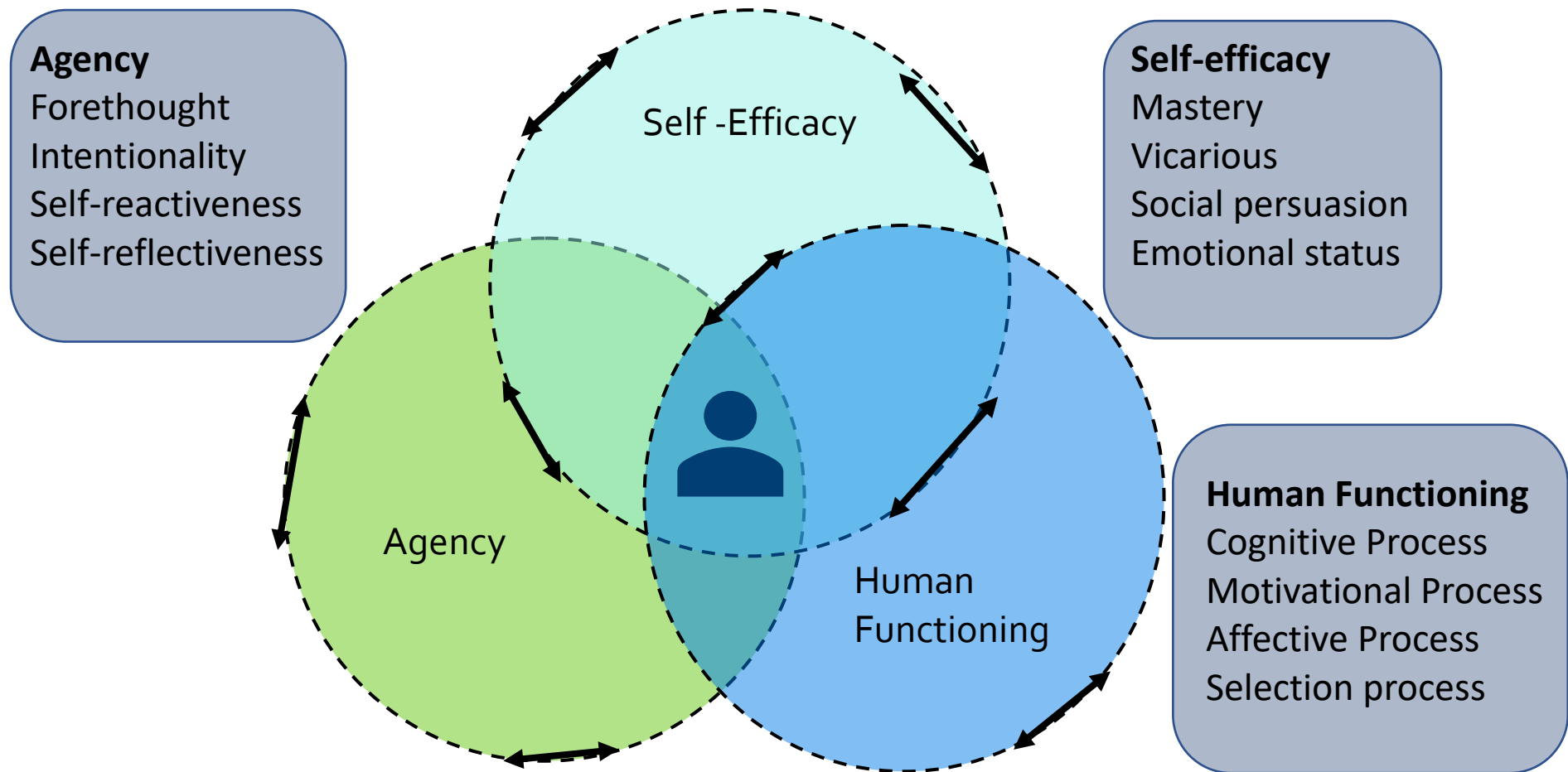


Figure 14. Dynamic representation of relationship between self-efficacy, agency and human functioning and the interaction between them

## Agency

Agency is described as the human capability to exert influence over one's functioning and the course of events by one's actions (Bandura, 2006a, p.164). Agency is present in three forms: direct personal agency; proxy agency; and collective agency (see Chapter 3 for an extended explanation). At this stage in their lives, some young people are still, to an extent, relying on the agency of others to help them achieve their goals. Teachers and parents are often proxy agents, and proxy agency is a feature of the observed behaviour and context within the intervention groups, and in the descriptive words of the young people in the focus groups. I will explore proxy agency later. In this first section I will explore the elements of direct personal agency.

There are four elements to direct personal agency. In a recent qualitative study of 16 young people who had alternated between being NEET and EET, conducted by Bell and Thurlby-Campbell (2017), the authors concluded that agency is a complex web of interactions. They argue that there are four types of interaction between the four components of agency which they name collectively as intra-agency. The first type is 'facilitation', which refers to the presence of one feature of agency serving to facilitate another. The second type is 'suppression' where the role of forethought is limited by intentionality. The third is 'compensation' where one aspect of agency is used to compensate for a lack of another feature of agency. Finally, the fourth inter-agent is 'undermining' where self-reflection is so strong that it challenges a person's intentionality (2017, p.141). This is an interesting study and explicitly challenges the need for all four elements to be present and positive before a person could be deemed to have direct personal agency. This is important in my research as young people are developing their agentic 'selves' and this development may be uneven. Agency is often demonstrated and witnessed through an individual's behaviour in context. In Thurlby-Campbell and Bell's research this was clearly the case. In my research I am relying on what the young people *say* they will do, in addition to what I witnessed in terms of their behaviour. My data not only show the presence of agentic elements but also show how, for some, the acquisition of these skills is challenging and not yet achieved. In the next part I describe each element and situate

it in the context of my research. I then explore these elements within each focus group.

### *Intentionality*

The intention to achieve a goal through action is not just setting a goal but pro-actively seeking to achieve that goal. This is a behaviour element of TRD. How can intentionality, or more precisely a move toward intentionality, be observed in a 15-year-old? In this research the young people are often able to say what career they would like to pursue. However, their ability to pro-actively seek to achieve that goal is far more difficult to discern. At this stage in their lives some are still, to an extent, relying on the agency of others to help them achieve their goals. Teachers and parents are often proxy agents at this time. I will explore proxy agency later (Bandura, 2006a).

### *Forethought*

There are three aspects of forethought, comprising the ability to: set goals; foresee likely outcomes; and choose behaviours that will achieve the desired outcome rather than an undesirable outcome. How might forethought be observed in this research? Setting goals in terms of career choice, where to live and where to study does not present a problem to these young people. However, visualising their future and what is required to achieve these goals can prove more difficult, and choosing the behaviour necessary to achieve these goals can prove challenging for some (Bandura, 2006a).

### *Self-reactiveness*

Self-reactiveness is the ability to monitor and control one's actions, emotions and thought in relation to events. This could be exercised through a combination of self-motivation, self-management and self-regulation. Events in young people's lives, both in and out of school, may, through convention and school rules, require them to control their emotions and actions. Using self-management and self-regulation to do so is a skill which young people are acquiring, and some find this acquisition process more challenging than others (Bandura, 2006b).

### *Self-reflection*

Self-reflection is characterised by reflecting on one's actions, pursuits and goals and reflecting on one's ability to achieve these, changing goals as appropriate. For a 15-year-old this may translate into being open to other opportunities, other pathways, and adjusting goals based on the reality of the situation. This is hard to do if an individual has low self-efficacy, as he or she does not believe in their ability to achieve. People's most crucial self-reflective mechanism is self-efficacy: that is, their belief that they can use their skills to achieve a desired effect (Bandura, 2006a).

### Girls' Non-Intervention Group - evidence of direct personal agency

The Girls' Non-Intervention Group was identified as at low risk of becoming NEET. They were articulate and answered the questions I asked with enthusiasm. They all showed a degree of intentionality and forethought towards their future career plans, their relationships and where they wanted to live. They all expressed intentionality when asked about their future, they all wanted to be married and some quite clearly wanted to be 'mums' by the time they were 26 and they mostly wanted to live near their family. These were goals, but their actions to fulfil these goals were not discernible. However, regarding their career plans, they demonstrated more than naïve intentionality. All the girls, except one, wanted to and expected to go to university, to become primary school teachers; previous research has shown that bright working-class girls often have this ambition (e.g., Sharpe, 1994). They were very clear about the stages needed to reach their chosen careers.

Sharon was typical of the group, and clearly knew and articulated all the stages needed to become a teacher. The group all demonstrated elements of direct personal agency through forethought and intentionality. They anticipated future events: "I will get my A levels"; they set goals for themselves: "I will go to University"; and they described their strategies for realising their ambitions: "I will get my A levels, go to university, get a PGCE and become a teacher". Another pupil, May, had an equally well thought-through plan, albeit taking a less academic route to her goal. As shown above, May aimed to go into the beauty business. Whilst May demonstrates goal setting and making choices to fulfil her goal, she is also demonstrating self-reactiveness by considering the debt implications of going to University and the chances of securing employment afterwards. Emma also demonstrates self-



reactiveness when she considers what she will do if she fails her GCSE Mathematics, a standard requirement for entrance to teacher training.

Self-motivation is a key feature within self-reactiveness and again in this group this is demonstrated by their discussion of the role of teachers; they spoke of teachers as being, “good” and “helpful”.

They also talked about subjects they liked (English, French) and disliked (Mathematics) but they clearly saw and articulated the transferability of school subjects. They spoke about how a broad knowledge of seemingly disconnected subjects could help them make decisions about their future lives and future study.

Their proposed action to help with stress and anxiety demonstrates other key features of self-reactiveness, those of self-management and self-regulation; including a comment from Emma: “I am anxious because we are starting our GCSE exams... There are loads of revision sessions... It’s just everything feels a bit much”.

The fourth aspect of direct personal agency is self-reflection. Self-reflection is a knowledge of one’s skills and ability, and one’s ability to pursue goals based on this information. Reflection gleaned by success or otherwise is the most important contributory factor to the level of self-efficacy. These girls show they possess self-reflection because they recognise the skills they have and how these will help them to pursue their goals.

#### Summary of Girls’ Non-Intervention Group’s direct personal agency

I have demonstrated, using data from the focus group discussions, that the girls in the Girls’ Non-Intervention Group have a clear vision of where they want to be and how to get there. They are setting goals and acting to achieve those goals. If they are facing difficulties, they address them head-on. They are also anticipating scenarios and have action plans to combat any negative outcomes. This direct personal agency is indicative of their high levels of self-efficacy. These girls have a belief in themselves and the ability to determine their own futures. Direct personal agency is nurtured by experiences within the environment. Their perceptions of the

environment and influences within are discussed above. It is these perceptions which also indicate their levels of self-efficacy. Of course, this is just one point in time and the data cannot reveal if, when these girls are faced with extreme difficulties, they have the resources to draw upon to continue their pathways they have set for themselves or adapt to different pathways if appropriate.

#### The Boys' Non-Intervention Group – evidence of direct personal agency

The boys in the Boys' Non-Intervention Group were identified as being at low risk of becoming NEET. They showed some degree of intentionality as they had goals and aspired to careers that required university degrees and additional training. One boy wanted to work in construction; he was the son of a successful builder who owned his own company. For all these boys, forethought was implicit rather than explicit. The boys were aware that these careers required further training and degrees, and all articulated the pathways needed to achieve this. They were self-assured, as indicated using, "I will" as opposed to, "I want to...". (see page184) They showed some level of forethought regarding the security of jobs and how to achieve security in work illustrated by these quotes: (I want) "*a job where you don't worry about the bills...*"; "*Security is important in a job...*"; "*You need a job that you won't be let down*".

They did have some strategies for keeping themselves in work. David spoke about how keeping a job was dependent on, "*becoming a specialist in something*". Matt had a strategy, "*to stay in a job you have to make sure you are ahead by learning new things*". This indicates a level of self-reactiveness and self-reflection. However, self-motivation, self-management and self-regulation as component parts of self-reactiveness were hard to discern in the responses in this group. In the exchange cited in Chapter 5, Andrew appears to be taking responsibility for his own learning when he says "... *you can teach them to a certain extent but it's up to that student to actually, actually do well in exams*", an indication of self-reactiveness. However, Luke states that "*it should really be a balance between student and teacher*" and Alan wants help to begin "*the teacher like starts you and then you finish*". They appear to be taking some but not full responsibility. This is an indication of the importance of proxy agency which is discussed later in this section.

The young people were as one when it came to having goals for their future lives, as Harry sums up, *“I want the same as everybody else here, house, car, holidays, to be able to go out when I want to, to be able to afford things”*. This could indicate some level of intentionality; he is goal-setting and he has career goals which should make these ambitions possible.

The boys in this group did refer to parents and teachers having an input in their lives and a stakeholder role in them achieving their goals. It appeared that they were using proxy agency to move their goals forward, which can still be an indication of a high sense of self efficacy. I will address this point further in the section entitled proxy agency.

#### Summary of Boys' Non-Intervention Group's direct personal agency

The Boys' Non-Intervention Group appear to show some elements needed to set goals and then act to achieve them. They still appear to be reliant on others to help them move their goals forward and appear from what they said to be less confident than the Girls' Non-Intervention Group in their ability to make things happen. However, this reliance on others and this apparently underdeveloped sense of direct personal agency does not necessarily mean they will have lower self-efficacy. They could, and from their assertions, *do* believe in their ability to set and achieve their goals, a sign of high self-efficacy.

#### The Boys' Intervention Group - evidence of direct personal agency

The Boys' Intervention Group were identified as being at high risk of becoming NEET. Regarding their direct personal agency, they did articulate some intentionality regarding careers they might like to follow. These were mostly practical careers; they wanted to be a plumber, join the army or pursue a career that relied on a perceived talent, a skate boarding pro, a writer and a Formula One driver. When I asked what they had to do and what they had to study to achieve their ambitions most were unable to answer. This concurs with Kintrea et al (2011) who in their study concluded that young people from deprived areas did have aspirations but did not know how to reach their goals. However, Tony said he was going to college to study on a Uniformed Public Service course and he was hopeful he would be able

to join the course at Level 2 if he passed some of his GCSEs. Tony was atypical in this group in that he showed intentionality and forethought.

John, in his mentoring session, in the exchange presented in Chapter 5, expressed his desire to be a Formula One driver and, despite the opportunity to adjust his goals with the help of the mentor, he remained somewhat steadfast. He did however show some sign of self-reactiveness (Bandura, 1986) in his comment regarding his ability in Mathematics.

Interestingly, the Boys' Intervention Group was the only group that wanted jobs that they could enjoy, have fun in and that provided variety. Perhaps they had witnessed their parents or others for whom this was not the case. They were also vague about where they might live in the future. They appeared unconcerned about their pending examinations, and an air of resignation to their fate was apparent. Many were expected by their teachers to get less than a C grade in Mathematics but with bravado they declared:

Mark: *...it doesn't matter, I could take it again next year and maybe get a better teacher.*

Richard: *...It's no big deal*

Charlie: *The GCSEs are hard and before them I enjoyed school.*

Bob: *I really loved school in Primary and I was much better at things.*

These expressions may indicate that their self-efficacy was lower, as they believed less in their skills and therefore they held less belief in their ability to achieve goals set by themselves and others, for example, to get good GCSEs.

### Summary of Boys' Intervention Group's direct personal agency

The boys in this group, except for Tony, did not demonstrate direct personal agency. They aspired to careers but knew little of how to make these ambitions a reality. It is important to note that whilst these ambitions did not require university degrees, they did require further training. They appear to have thought very little about life after school and as school became more difficult they lamented the change from their past school life where they felt they had achieved. One consequence of this lack of

achievement could be lower self-efficacy, which in turn affects the development of direct personal agency. These are explored further in later sections of the chapter.

#### The Girls' Intervention Group- evidence of direct personal agency

The Girls' Intervention Group were identified as being at high risk of becoming NEET. The girls were, for the most part, vague about their future. They said, for example: "I want to work with children"; "I will work in an office"; "become a model". Whilst this may indicate intentionality it does not fulfil the criteria of forethought as they were so vague. Also, when asked, they had little idea of how they might realise these ambitions except to say, "*I guess [I need] IT and English*" or with reference to how one might become a model, "*You just get spotted or you have to get pictures done*". However, there was one notable exception in this group; Dawn shows intentionality and demonstrates her action to achieve her goal. She is determined to work with animals, which may seem vague at first but despite the mentor's best efforts to secure a Plan B, Dawn is adamant and shows she is using direct personal agency by negotiating her work placement. She says, "*I am going to college to work with animals. I did my work experience at the dogs' home and now I am going every Wednesday.*"

It is of interest to note that this exchange took place between a mentor and Dawn. In the focus group discussion Dawn had spoken very little and had not revealed these plans. However, while it is fair to say that Dawn is atypical of the group, it is interesting that she does appear to have direct personal agency. In her interaction with her mentor she demonstrated all four aspects of direct personal agency. She has an intention to work with animals; she takes actions to make this happen; she sets herself the goal of work experience; and she chooses to negotiate with others to make that happen. She uses self-motivation, self-regulation and self-management to good effect. I have observed Dawn in the Intervention Groups; she rarely speaks and when she does, it is barely audible. I and other facilitators I spoke to assumed she was shy and because of this we assumed she had low self-confidence. This may be so or perhaps her behaviour is a good way of making sure she is listened to, as everybody is quiet, so they hear what she has to say. This is an example of how, without engaging with young people, misconceptions can arise about them.

In stark contrast, the exchange with Louise and her mentor reveals risky behaviour that could impede direct personal agency and be the result of low self-efficacy. Jerry the mentor tries to offer Louise a small directed goal towards her ambition of becoming a model by explaining that learning a language might be useful. This is rejected outright by the negative comment, *“I’m no good at languages”*. Jerry perseveres but Louise reveals more pressing problems: *“I bunk off school a lot; school hates me, and I hate youth workers coming to my house and making me go to lessons [...] Because I get drunk”*.

### Summary of Girls Intervention Group

The girls in the Girls’ Intervention Group were less articulate than all the other groups in the focus group discussions. They appeared to struggle to think of what they might do in the future. They struggled to stay focused; their attention drifted to boys, *The X Factor* and TV soap operas. They were disengaged from the process. They did engage well with some of the interventions and this is addressed in later sections. However, Dawn, despite her quietness, was the most focused of all the young people. The contrast with Louise demonstrates how individual differences may be masked by being labelled, in this case ‘at risk of NEET’, based on the presence of some characteristics.

### Overall discussion on similarities and differences

My discussion above indicates that there is some evidence of differences between these groups, and some differences between the girls and boys. These gender differences may be evidence of their emerging adulthood, as they are in an extremely volatile changeable phase of their lives where gender difference can be most stark. The girls seem to be conforming to an image of wife, mother, manageable career, for example: primary school teacher; working in the beauty industry; working with children; or working in an office. The boys mentioned boys’ stereotypical jobs of plumbers, builders, architects, etc.. The boys talked about fairness, or more usually unfairness, and teachers as support to help them and they complained about the school’s rules and regulations. On the other hand, the girls appeared to take more responsibility for their own learning. This particular gender difference might justify the reintroduction of being male as a characteristic of risk of NEETness and as such

could be reintroduced to the point system of any revision of the RONI. Their individualised approach to their learning signifies that they believe that if they put the effort in, they get the reward or failure. This concurs with Bauman's (2001, p.9) assertion that personal responsibility is foremost and that the link between elements of environment and the individual have been lost.

It is noticeable that the difference between the Intervention Groups and the Non-Intervention Groups is most evident in the connection between school and future jobs. The Girls' Non-Intervention Group show appreciation of the transferability of skills, whereas the other groups link subjects they study to work, and for many these school subjects feel inappropriate. The Non-Intervention Groups, in the main, desire professional jobs which require further study and attending university. Those in the Intervention Groups aspire to more practical jobs. These differences are important as those in the Intervention Group are there because of a selection process that puts them at risk of being NEET. By its very definition, being NEET concerns economic success defined by having the skills to find and keep a training place or go on to further education or secure a job within an environment that allows adequate opportunities to do so. It is therefore noteworthy that the things that are different relate to the transferability of skills and the type of work they aspire too. I would also add that in the Non-Intervention Groups the pupils spoke with confidence about the next steps, how to achieve their aspirations, whereas this was lacking or vague, except for Dawn and Tony, within the Intervention Groups.

### Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy and agency and how it affects adolescents' behaviour, aspirations and achievements, is presented in detail in Chapter 3. To summarise in respect of my findings, it is apparent that those with lower self-efficacy struggle to achieve direct personal agency. This view is both explicit and implicit in the foundations of, and discussions and development by Bandura and others, of social cognitive theory (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Pajares & Usher, 2008).

### Further examination of the observations

Levels of self-efficacy influence the development of direct personal agency (Bandura, 2006a). Self-efficacy has four component parts; performance outcomes, vicarious experiences, social persuasion and physical and emotional states. All of these contribute to the level of self-efficacy which in turn affects direct personal agency. The four component parts are accomplished through many interactions over time. These examples are taken from my observation of the interventions, presented earlier in Chapter 5 and by some of the comments made by the young people in the focus groups.

### Performance outcomes

Successfully accomplishing tasks helps build a belief in one's efficacy, whilst failure undermines self-belief. This is especially true when self-efficacy beliefs are emerging. Long term self-efficacy requires tasks to be challenging, to build perseverance, and a knowledge that success requires overcoming obstacles. If success is too easily accomplished, then the capability to overcome adversity or difficulty is not built and resilience is low (Bandura, 2006a). In school this translates to being able to complete the work set with some help. If the work is too difficult pupils get despondent and give up. If it is too easy they are never challenged. In schools, teachers often use a scaffolding technique (Edglossary, 2015) to move pupils forward at a pace that is suitable.

If a person experiences success in an activity or task then the higher their self-efficacy becomes, whereas constant failure undermines their ability to do well. The extract in Chapter 5 illustrates the difficulty experienced by John. He was moved to a top set in Mathematics and felt under pressure to perform. He found the work difficult and felt more comfortable when he was moved back down to a lower set where he was able to achieve and experience success.

The transition from primary school to secondary school is also a time of readjustment that tests pupils' self-efficacy, which for some is never regained (Bandura, 2006b). As previously highlighted in Chapter 5, Bob indicates how his belief in his abilities has diminished and Charlie indicates that he feels his abilities



are tested by the content of GCSE. In contrast, Terri appreciates the transferability of the skills she has acquired; this may indicate a higher level of self-efficacy on her part.

### Vicarious experiences

Observing the efforts and success of people like oneself raises the belief that one has the capability to succeed. Conversely, observing others' efforts that fail can undermine one's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989). The closer the perceived similarity of the model, the stronger the influence. Young people observe their parents, siblings, teachers, and others, achieve success or otherwise within and outside the school setting. This may take the form of observing the consequences of non-conformist behaviour or being encouraged to succeed by witnessing or being told stories of success through desirable routes, for example, getting good grades. This can affect their belief in their own chances of becoming something they value (Bandura, 1989).

As outlined in Chapter 5, during one of the intervention sessions led by Simon, he asks one of the participants to model the activity of mind mapping and, with Simon's encouragement and scaffolding, the participant successfully completes the task. This models a successful outcome for the other participants and this in turn leads to all the participants doing well. The pupils observe the activity and then repeat the process; this is a tactic often used by teachers (Giridharan & Raju, 2017). In this way they have observed success in themselves and will be more likely to want to repeat the experience. Another example present is observing the consequences of behaviour in the library incident; whilst other young people did feel angry they did not behave in the same way as Mark. It is doubtful that this one episode is responsible for their reticence to react however, they may have witnessed incidents of a similar nature throughout their school life and therefore these may have informed their decisions.

### Social persuasion

Verbal persuasion that one possesses the necessary capabilities to succeed can lead to greater effort. This must be based on realistic expectations. If not, it can lead to disappointing results that only serve to undermine self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006a).

Negative verbal comments can result in avoidance tactics and undermine an individual's motivation. Young people are subject to verbal reinforcement, by praise or negative comments, from teachers, parents, peers, and significant others. Praise given appropriately can raise self-efficacy but overuse of praise, especially for actions or work unworthy of praise, has a detrimental effect. Schools often use reward schemes to reinforce 'good' or conforming behaviour and effort or devise negative consequences for 'poor' or non-conformist behaviour.

Jay, one of the facilitators, uses verbal persuasion as encouragement to set goals to be positive. She states: "School is about **your** future, school is where you learn great stuff, you need to be more positive". Jay makes sure all contributions are validated and valued. She continually makes comments, for example, "That's an interesting point, can you say more?". Jay uses questions and the pupils' answers to explain the connection between ambition, goal setting and achievement success. She emphasises: "Success is yours, what you value". She goes on, "Ambition and your goals are yours. There will always be people trying to put you down but if you really want something you must persevere. It's OK to change your mind... a good goal would be to get the best GCSEs you can."

Following an incident with one pupil in the library (presented in Chapter 5) Mr A. praises the class for their behaviour. By doing so he is reinforcing their behaviour over the behaviour of Mark. After the interviewing intervention session, presented in Chapter 5, the facilitator, Mr A. and the whole class congratulate Reg. The class gives Reg a round of rapturous applause and Reg really enjoys the attention. Mr A., who watched the role play, said "*Well done, Reg. That was excellent!*". The whole class are reinforcing the work and contribution made by Reg and there is a sense of collective praise. However, as noted previously, Reg cannot seem to handle the praise and it does not help him to build on his success.

### Physical and emotional state

How one feels physically and emotionally, and more importantly how one perceives and interprets these feelings can affect how one judges one's capabilities. For some, stress is a motivator, for others it is a debilitating force. Mental health issues among

adolescents have been highlighted recently, with the announcement by the Prime minister's office pledging a revolution in mental health treatment (UK Government, Prime Minister's Office, 2016).

The stress and anxiety felt among all these groups should not be underestimated. The transfer from primary to secondary school was mentioned by the young people, as was the concept of school becoming harder, as was the school's preoccupation, as they saw it, with rules. This raises questions of what school is for and how it may be perceived in young people's minds as a route to future economic prosperity.

In the intervention led by Jay she is constantly asking the pupils to justify their feelings and challenging them. She wants them to be positive and think positively. Positive feelings lead to more positive outcomes (Bandura, 2001).

The incident in the library (see Chapter 5) is a good example of how physical and emotional states can impinge on learning situations. Mark does not have a developed sense of self management to help him when he becomes angry. It is important to note that his feeling and his reading of the situation could be true. The whole incident for him reinforces his sense of unfairness, injustice and perhaps feeling like he is rubbish. When he shouts, "Why can't she move? We're always here." he seems to feel displaced, unimportant and he becomes intransigent and feels justified in his actions, "It's not right, it's crap. I'm not moving." He cannot control his feelings of being made to feel less important, overlooked. Other participants agree with him and may have the same feelings, but they are less vocal and more able to make a comment and then move on.

In the mentoring sessions Louise reveals physical and emotional states that may indicate deep problems. Louise does not appear to have any sense of self-worth and as such would have low levels of self-efficacy.

The Boys' Intervention Group were stressed over the rules regarding behaviour and attendance. They expressed this as, "...if you're sick you're sick you can't help it"; "*they all get involved and tell you you can't have time off...*"; "*makes you sicker*".

On the plus side all the young people described school as somewhere to socialise, meet and make friends. In the questionnaire many agreed to the statement, ‘my teachers like me’ and, ‘I like learning’ which are indications of positivity which influence level of self-efficacy.

## Summary

Levels of self-efficacy are observed through how people make decisions and function throughout their lives. These decisions take account of an accumulation of ‘evidence’, real and imagined, from experiences of agency and the level of self-efficacy acquired. The four elements of self-efficacy need to work in tandem for young people to have positive experiences that raise their self-efficacy if necessary. The teachers and facilitators leading these interventions are endeavouring to give those in the intervention groups positive experiences and positive messages<sup>22</sup>. However, this is difficult to do as some participants are hampered by their experiences to date, the observations they have made to date, and their under-developed physical and emotional states. Having said that, the comments made by the Boys’ Intervention Group and the Girls’ Intervention Group about the intervention indicate that they did value the experience. They said it was: “*A good opportunity*”, “*Worthwhile*”, “*We’re lucky to have been chosen*”. Many spoke about how other pupils in the school would benefit: “*Everybody should do it*”, “*All those in Year 10 and 11 should do it. Everybody would benefit*”.

## Proxy agency

This section considers what is the role played by proxy agency? How does this help in developing self-efficacy and lead to greater direct personal agency?

## School as a proxy agent

School as an entity could be described as acting as a proxy agent because the young people use school to work towards their goals (Bandura, 2001b). This is complex, as school is also the environment that influences and interacts with their setting of goals, and this serves to highlight the complex nature of TRD. When the participants

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<sup>22</sup> The interventions were not evaluated as part of this study. Interventions designed to tackle issues of self-efficacy with those at risk of becoming NEET might have been able to address the issues raised concerning the participants’ experience to date and their emotional states. However, I have not found examples of this in the literature. This may be an area in which dissemination of my findings would be useful.

talk about the purpose of school they use different verbs. The girls use words like, “school helps us” or “gives us”; the boys talk about how school, “makes” but they are all indications of school as something done to them, not in their control. The use of “helps” by the girls in the intervention group may also indicate a passiveness within the girls with a sense of them being assisted, aided to success, whereas the boys’ “makes” may imply a construction, a moulding of them and their future. All these utterances of “makes” and “helps” may imply a less well-developed sense of direct personal agency, as to have personal agency is to have and be aware of the influence that one can exert over one’s own life chances. These young people have not developed full operative personal agency but may have a sense of proxy agency through the school.

### Teachers as proxy agents

Teachers act as proxy agents in that pupils use teachers’ knowledge and ability to share that knowledge to pass examinations. All the groups spoke about how teachers were good or bad, how they were judged, how teachers could help or hinder their progress and the stress teachers worked under. This could imply that some see the teachers as a guiding force (an agent) and that both the teacher and the young people have a stake in the outcome, not just the young person. Whilst there is an air of sympathy for the teachers, a lot of responsibility is placed on the teachers by the pupils too, as Alan expressed it: “*to get them through*” and as Luke said, “*to try hard*” and a few commented that it was to deliver, “*good, interesting lessons*”. In the Girls’ Intervention Group teachers were described as, “*good, kind, hardworking*” but as shown in Chapter 5, it was in the Boys’ Non-intervention Group that it was notable that a degree of projection was evident. The boys may have been ‘projecting’ their future success or failure away from themselves and relinquishing responsibility. Whilst it seems to be evident only in this focus group, it does raise questions regarding how teachers’ behaviours and comments could form a frame of reference for all the young people in this research about the value of education and how they fit into school mechanisms.

### Parents as proxy agents as proxy agents

Parents are proxy agents for their children and to a diminishing degree adolescents

(Bandura, 2001b). In this research the participants rarely spoke about their parents and when they did their comments exemplified proxy agency. Vicki spoke about the cost of university and how her parents would want to help her rather than allowing her to get into debt. John spoke about how his Mum came up to the school to intervene when he felt uncomfortable in his maths set. By doing so she acted as a direct agentic force to secure the outcome John was seeking.

### Facilitators

Mentors are often employed to guide young people and help them through different techniques to synthesise their ambitions and to some extent rationalise their choices. In this way mentors often move young people to the achievable. The facilitators often took the role of proxy agents, as did mentors and teachers, as they were endeavouring to lead the young people into direct personal agency by setting realistic goals, often in small steps. In the exchange between Jerry, the mentor, and Louise (see Chapter 5 for the full exchange) Jerry is offering Louise some choices based on her wish to work in the fashion industry. By helping Louise find contacts the mentor is helping by proxy. He is using his skills to move the young person to a position of direct personal agency. By doing some of the groundwork he presents an opportunity for the young person to take small steps to be in control. Of course, Louise may not have the skills to use this. Later Louise says she is *“no good at languages”*.

Those with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid tasks that they perceive difficult, as they fear failure. If success is not experienced, then mastery is less likely to be achieved, as one does not want to persevere (Bandura, 1986). Louise is also involved in risky behaviours. Despite the mentor giving examples of others that have made it in the fashion industry as a positive example, Louise seems unlikely to pursue the contacts. This excerpt highlights the connection between environment, behaviour and personal in that Louise is unmotivated to come to school where she feels unable to succeed. She has low self-efficacy and her behaviour deteriorates.

Proxy agency is defined as other people working as intermediaries to obtain a goal. Young people who are developing their direct personal agency, often rely on parents and teachers to help them move forward. This may be liaising with the school,

financial support or making the first contact with a college or course. All these skills will eventually become the responsibility of the young person themselves and some find this move to independent agency more challenging than others.

### Human functioning

Evidence of Human function is less easily observed amongst young people in a school setting. This is because human functioning behaviours and choosing behaviour and pathways is an accumulation of experience that these young people do not wholly possess yet. It is important to emphasise here that agency, self-efficacy and human function are all integrated. Selecting activities based on one's self-efficacy, even with efficient direct personal agency, that you are then unable to succeed in, could lead to a lowering of self-efficacy, and different choices being made (Bandura,1989).

### Cognitive processes

Human behaviour is developed through thought and the values placed on certain achievements and characteristics. Goals are set within the perimeters of perceived capabilities. People with high self-belief set greater challenges and when success follows, this bolsters their self-belief and reaffirms their self-efficacy. For others who experience self-doubt and become less sure, their self-belief is challenged and the anxiety that follows can lead to underperformance and thus reinforces their perceived low capabilities. This could be observed through the choices the young people make in relation to their ambition to attend university and pursue professional careers, some stated, “ I will be a Doctor” , “I will go to university” over those who set their sights within practical careers stating, “I think I will work with children”, “ I am going to be a plumber” (Bandura, 1989).

### Motivational Processes:

Self-efficacy is an essential factor in the self-regulation of motivation. People form values and beliefs about what they would like to do and can do. They set goals and have plans of action to realise their desired futures. Levels of self-efficacy govern the goals set, the level of effort employed, the perseverance, and the level of resilience

employed to realise those goals. People with self-doubts are more likely to give up (Bandura,1989).

Young people in this research differ from each other in their motivation. For some, barriers of examination success do not faze them, as Emma expressed it in relation to her GCSE in Mathematics, *“I will keep trying ’till I get it”*.

### Affective processes

Those with higher levels of self-efficacy and belief in their coping capabilities are better equipped to exercise control over the level of stress and anxiety they experience when faced with difficult situations. Those with lower self-efficacy dwell on their incapacity to manage these threats and are subsequently unable to cope and this may then result in depression. Anxiety and stress were evident in all the groups albeit that it took different forms. For some, emotional anxiety overwhelmed them, and they were unable to cope (Bandura, 1989). The incident in the library where Mark was unable to accept the move to another classroom is a case in point.

### Selection Processes

Levels of self-efficacy can affect one’s life choices by influencing the activities, interests and occupations one feels are available to one. If one believes one has the capability to succeed in an activity or career, one is more likely to pursue it. These choices promote different interests and social networks that ultimately define life courses (Bandura, 1989). The young people in the focus groups did appear to be selecting careers in which they had some chance of succeeding. Dawn gained experience in her chosen career and thus felt able to realise her ambition of working with animals. Some, perhaps those with lower self-efficacy and direct personal agency, whilst setting career goals, were vague about how to achieve these goals. Beth states simply, *“I want to work in an office”*.

### Summary

In this chapter I have discussed my data within an SCT theoretical perspective. I have presented evidence of the presence of personal direct agency and explored the differences present in the groups. There are also differences between the boys and



girls. This leads to a tentative conclusion that there are some differences between those identified at risk of NEET and those not deemed at risk. The environmental situated conditions do appear to have an impact on the young people's lives and abilities to set realistic goals. It is also important to note that resilience may play a part in these young people's futures. As Schoon and Bynner (2003) demonstrate, those with aspirations to have professional careers *and* a strong belief in their own ability are also the most resilient.

## Chapter 7 Concluding remarks

### Introduction

In the previous chapters I have argued that the NEET discourse is complex. I have discussed the historical background which led to the formation of this acronym and how NEET is a socially constructed phenomenon. How, given these conditions and preconceived ideas, do young people in my study, some of whom have been deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET, experience school and what are their aspirations?

The main conclusions from this research are that: there are some differences between the boys and girls in the study, regardless of whether they are identified as high risk of becoming NEET or not; there are no significant differences in the aims, ambitions or aspirations within the whole cohort that took part in this study regardless of their identified level of risk of becoming NEET; there are some differences in the young people's direct personal agency, and thus self-efficacy, between some of the young people identified as at risk of NEET and some of those identified as not at risk, who took part in this study. The environmental situated conditions do appear to have an impact on all the young people who took part in this study, in their lives and in their ability to set realistic goals.

This study was both helped and hindered by its collaborative nature. In the first instance, the Local Authority's agenda of reducing the number of NEETs, and the creation of a tool to identify those at risk of becoming NEET, whilst well-intentioned, somewhat limited the scope of the research. The risk of becoming NEET was framed as an individual problem to be addressed through raising young people's aspirations and achievements through targeted interventions. The RONI tool would benefit from a thorough critical investigation in the context of other RONIs created around the country in response to the same policy imperatives. As the study developed and became more narrowly-focussed in terms of the research questions, site and number of participants, I was able to examine the link between the environment and the young people in a way that brought forward their voices; this would have been difficult if the original plan to survey pupils of all the Local Authority's secondary schools had been pursued. In the event, this study became

focussed on one cohort of pupils in one school, and within that cohort I recorded the experience of 36 pupils through my qualitative research. I was thus able to take a more holistic view of the young people's experiences. The collaboration with the research site and lead staff members facilitated this approach in a friendly enthusiastic way. However, at times the collaborative nature of this study was challenging for me as a researcher. I was an insider in my role as a Local Authority employee who became an outsider following my redundancy. From that point, my role as a researcher within the school setting was undefined and complicated; at times I took on the role of Teaching Assistant and felt responsible for the class, while at other times I felt I was barely tolerated, especially by facilitators from outside organisations working with the school. This was evident by the facilitators' lack of interest in talking or meeting with me to discuss the interventions they planned and the impact they were hoping to achieve. Such data might have assisted me in my conclusions and helped my exploration of agency and self-efficacy. However, adopting the role of Teaching Assistant, which fell outside of my remit as a researcher, placed me in a position to view the school as a whole, and this helped form my connection with the young people.

I worked with the school to produce the questionnaire for our mutual benefit. From this, I produced frequency tables for the Senior Management Team to share with other school staff to discuss and learn from. However, the questionnaire would have benefited from piloting to make it more concise and well-focussed. This was not possible due to time pressures within the school and there was also a degree of ownership of the questionnaire by the school as the Senior Management Team approved the final version of the questionnaire (see Chapter 4). It would also have been beneficial to have run statistical testing in the first year to inform subsequent years. The nature of the questions and the scoring mechanism proved challenging for robust statistical testing. Despite these flaws, the questionnaire was rigorously administered and the statistical testing that ensued was useful and informative. There were potentially 285 pupils who took part (numbers vary through absence and refusal) in the completion of the questionnaire each year, thus the resulting dataset is substantial and of substantive value.

The focus group data are particularly rich; the contributions of the young people were honest, intelligent, sometimes amusing and always useful. I would have welcomed the chance to interview these young people on more than one occasion, both to pursue matters of interest from the first tranche and to ask more questions. It would have been useful to have been able to choose the focus groups myself to ensure that they represented cross-sections of the school population. As it was, the school chose the participants and I cannot rule out the possibility of bias in their selection process.

The same is true of the pupils who took part in the interventions. It would have been useful if an evaluation of the interventions could have formed part of this research, a 'before and after' evaluation of the pupils' goals and ambitions, and other markers. In the event this was not possible as the charities instigated their own evaluation and the school was reluctant to introduce a separate evaluation due to a lack of time and resources. I think the participant observation of the interventions could have been enriched by me directly asking the young people at the time what they were gaining (or not) from the sessions. Nonetheless, these observations provided valuable insight into the behaviour of the young people and added another facet to the overall picture.

In the quasi-Grounded Theory approach I adopted thematic analysis leads to theory and not *vice versa*. I was not looking for self-efficacy and agency and a connection to the environment when I devised my research instruments. SCT and TRD emerged through the analysis of my data and became the theoretical lens I applied to illuminate and discuss my findings. If I had started from a position of knowledge of SCT, I would have had the option of testing it through my research design. I also regret that I could not follow these young people as they reached 18 and beyond in order to investigate whether they did or did not become NEET and whether those deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET transcended their predicted status.

### Contribution to knowledge and literature

This research was small in scale and location and as such the findings cannot be generalised. However, I believe it makes a useful contribution to the NEET discourse because it gives an account of young people's experiences of school, examined by

quantitative and qualitative methods and viewed through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory. I have made a contribution to knowledge in the following areas.

In my exploration, in Chapter 2, of the statistics produced by LSYPE and the YCS within The Activities and Experiences of 16 (17, 18 and 19) Year Olds (DCSF/ONS, 2008, 2009; DfE/ONS, 2010, 2011). I have reconfigured the statistics used by LYPSE (Table 4) to illustrate that young people who have none of the characteristics of NEET, do nonetheless become NEET, and in significant numbers. This finding is important as it challenges the emphasis placed on the individual characteristics of young people as risk factors for becoming NEETness.

I have explored SCT and TRD (Bandura, 1986,) in Chapter 3. Through this, I adapted and presented a dynamic illustration of how the TRD model works when applied to young people at risk of becoming NEET. By placing environment, behaviour and personal, the three elements of TRD, in three overlapping circles with arrows to depict motion, I have illustrated the continual movement and interaction between the three component parts (see Chapter 3, Figure 5). Furthermore, I have adapted Pajares and Usher's (2008) model of TRD within educational settings to reflect the wider reaching elements of TRD present within the NEET debate and the consequential influence within educational settings (Chapter 3, Figure 6). In Chapter 4, I have presented the attrition of my questionnaire data in what I believe to be an innovative style using a stacked bar chart (Chapter 4, Figure 10).

I have used thematic analysis to interpret my data, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006), Bryman (2012). I present a six-stage approach which clearly indicates the process from which a theoretical perspective can become apparent and lead to the examination of themes (Chapter 4 Figures 11) and in Chapter 5 Figure 13 illustrates my results using this approach with my data.

My research adds to the sparse literature on young people at risk of becoming NEET, paying attention to the voices of the young people. It has revealed that young people should not be lumped together and classed as unambitious, aimless and disengaged. Rather, it has shown that young people in a high-NEET area are very diverse. They do have ambitions. They are neither pebbles on a beach being tossed and turned by

policy, school and parents, nor steadfast rocks that cannot adapt to or change given different situations or opportunities. Rather they are, as Bandura describes them, both “producers as well as products of social systems” (Bandura, 1986, p.278) living their lives in the interrelationship between environment, behaviour and personal traits. I believe their levels of self-efficacy and direct personal agency will affect these young people’s futures, as will their resilience.

I have shown that: self-efficacy and agency matter, as first indicated by Bandura (1986); gender stereotyping still exists, which confirms Sharpe’s work (1970s and 1992) and more recent research (e.g., Berrington, Roberts & Tammes, 2016). Ambition, aims and aspirations are clearly in evidence, but young people do not always possess the skills needed to make them a reality (Kintrea et al. 2011). I have used Bandura’s SCT theory as a lens through which to examine my data; I have shown the interconnection between environment, behaviour and personal traits (Bandura, 1989). I have argued that to tackle the NEET problem by concentrating on only one of these elements is unlikely to work. Instead, all three elements need attention to help secure prosperity for the individual and society.

## Recommendations

I would recommend to policy makers that the terms NEET and at risk of NEET are not fit for purpose because they do not reflect the diverse nature of the problems that young people face in the transition to work or further education and training. In addition, the effectiveness of RONIs (or at least the RONI used in this study) has been brought into question by this research. This is because RONIs may be based on assumptions which prove unhelpful in identifying all those who could benefit from targeted interventions. Furthermore, the statistics based on assumptions about those who are NEET or EET are fundamentally flawed, as discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, I would advocate the development of a more robust marker for poverty than FSM and concur with Hobbs and Vignoles (2007) who conclude that on its own FSM is an ineffective marker of poverty and that household income would be more efficient.

Schools are part of the environment that influence the personal aspects of people's lives, and as such they shoulder a huge, if perhaps unfair, responsibility. In my findings, the facilitators' use of positive language, engaging style and relevant resources generally resulted in positive outcomes in class. Furthermore, goal setting activities within one-to-one mentoring sessions moved these young people towards direct personal agency and achievable goals. Hence, a more comprehensive approach to the development of direct personal agency, and higher self-efficacy in young people within school policy could lead to better outcomes. This should include a robust policy document with an implementation and evaluation plan, with robust checks and balances.

The national statistics examined in this research are often too general to reveal variation in individual circumstances. The qualitative data used in this research were undertaken in an urban area and were small in scale. They highlighted self-efficacy and agency as crucial components of success. I would suggest there is a need for small scale, in-depth, qualitative research to shed light on individual circumstances: What happens to young people who have low self-efficacy or low levels of direct personal agency? Can these be overcome and how? What helps them? What hinders them? What difference does it make what gender one is, what class one is from, if one lives in a town or in a suburban or rural area? What opportunities are there? Are they the same? Are individuals able to take advantage of them, if so why and how? What role do governments, local authorities, schools and other local organisations play in helping young people? Is this different for different groups of young people? Research along these lines move beyond labelling to identifying solutions to the issues that young people face in their transitions to adulthood. Otherwise there is a risk that research will continue to concentrate on the young people who are considered to be 'the problem'.

And a final note for all. One of the most disappointing findings from this small research study was the presence of stereotypical gender roles, although other research from within education and beyond would suggest this is not unusual (see Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus & Young, 2006; Guimond & Roussel, 2001; McQuaid & Bond 2004; Mendick, 2005; Barreto, Ryan & Schmitt, 2009). This needs tackling from all aspects of society, in government policies, workplaces, and

amongst parents, carers, schools, teachers, the media in all its forms, including social media and researchers.

### Summary

This research was initially intended to be an evaluative study within a large organisation and became, through circumstances which could not have been foretold, a focused exploration in one school. I have described how this evolved. In Chapter 1 of this thesis I set the scene by giving an historical overview while paying particular attention to how education became inextricably linked to economy. In Chapter 2, I examined the statistical evidence that was used to create a Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI), which was subsequently intended to form the basis for the initial focus of what became this thesis. In explaining this development, I explored the nature of collaborative research and its strengths and weaknesses. I also exposed the statistics that informed the creation of the RONI through a critique which explored why they may not be useful in identifying those at risk of becoming NEET. I talked at length about the pilot and the results, to set the scene for this research. I discussed SCT in depth to explain why it is useful in an educational setting, and I adapted Pajares and Usher's (2008) model to expose all the elements which contributed to at risk of NEETness. This formed the crucial backbone of the story of my study, as it showed the overlapping influences on young people's everyday lives, and therefore revealed that any solution cannot be thought of as either individual or structural, but both individual and structural. I moved on to explain and explore my methodological approach: a case study mixed method approach and why thematic analysis was used to analyse the rich qualitative data. I then used SPSS and my codes to present the data I gathered from three sources: questionnaire; focus groups; and participant observation. This was a crucial step towards examining my findings in greater depth. I did this to explore the reliability and validity of my findings, and to support subsequent discussions, and to give weight and proper attention to the voice of these young people. I wanted to allow the reader to know these young people; to hear their direct speech in detail to appreciate the value of their utterances. I explained how coding this data led me to explore SCT. In Chapter 6 I discussed in more detail what these young people said and did, and the differences and similarities between them. I examined this in terms of their developing agency and thus their levels of self-



efficacy. In doing so I answered my research questions, as stated in the opening paragraphs of this chapter.

In conclusion, participants in my study, despite some being deemed to be at risk of becoming NEET, do not all have low aspirations (although some of their aspirations are gender-stereotypical). This confirms what other research has found (e.g., Stahl 2012, Roberts, et al., 2014, Kintrea, et al., 2011), this shows that the idea that young people lack aspirations is not well founded. The notable differences between groups and individuals, where they do appear, lie in their levels of self-efficacy and agency. The skills and attributes needed to raise self-efficacy and be a successful agent in determining one's own future are not just personal, neither are they only acquired through education. Rather, they are produced through a reciprocal process combining the environment, behaviour and the individual's personal qualities. At a macro-level the social and cultural environment is shaped by government policies and political direction, in addition to economic factors and social norms. Furthermore, the interaction of these factors at meso and micro levels affect individuals' normal everyday debates, decisions, and ultimately, their behaviour and personal interactions. Self-efficacy and individual agency have been shown to help and aid young people to navigate this situation: to set goals that they feel confident in achieving; to build resilience to unforeseen obstacles; and take charge of and be responsible for their futures. This, for some, implies an individualistic approach, however, this does not have to be the case. Young people will only succeed in a society that values their different skills. It will take new thinking and new policies to encourage this move. A move towards a more socially mobile and a more equitable society in which young people can thrive needs to be prioritised. Through the dissemination of this work by publication in academic journals and other material produced for teachers as well as through social media, I would hope to promote these recommendations to those who may benefit from the insights I have presented here: politicians, educators and young people themselves.

## Epilogue

I started this thesis with my story, so it seems appropriate to end it with this epilogue. This PhD began in an environment of optimism and at the time I was looking forward to a long career in education. Circumstances changed and the journey I have been on whilst undertaking this thesis can be thought of as an example of TRD and SCT in practice. Environmental factors played a big part, in this case the economic recession and the austerity measures imposed by central government impacted on the behaviour of the Local Authority which made cuts to their budget. As a result, they refocused their attention onto statutory provision, I was made redundant and this research changed. Being made redundant together with ill health affected my self-efficacy. At times I no longer believed that I had the skills necessary to complete this work. However, what I do have is resilience, which might be more aptly described as stubbornness. Throughout this process I have also maintained some level of directed personal agency; I did have the goal to finish but at times floundered on how this might be achieved. Two factors contributed to helping me regain my confidence: my employment as a Research Fellow at a University where I undertook research in a related field and reported on my findings to an international audience. I was reenergised, and this reaffirms that levels of self-efficacy are affected by successful task completion. Alongside this I received incredible support from what is often described as ‘significant others’. These were people who supported me and whose belief in me was resolute and therefore they helped me to overcome my insecurities. My experience is testimony to how effective ‘significant others’ can be in helping people to achieve their goals.

This thesis, like my own story is about the interconnection between the environment, behaviour and personal traits. It starts with a history of the cultural landscape and I discuss ‘big picture’ theoretical positions. I then describe the research and its attention to the minutiae, the everyday language of pupils in one school. I conclude by placing the research back where it began, in the policies of governments and schools. In completing this work, I have given the young people a voice and in doing so restored some of my own confidence in my ability to work and to help young people, directly and indirectly, by asking questions about the role of education within society and how that role can best serve all of society, not just those deemed to be the best.

# Appendix 1

Document to Head Teachers

## **Rationale:**

### **Preventing disconnection from education by secondary-age pupils**

Young people who become disconnected from education face a higher risk of unemployment, teenage pregnancy, criminality or drug abuse. Many of these become NEET. From a review of recent literature on NEETs, four things stand out:

1. intervention and data collection seems to start too late - the focus is on 15+, not before. Preventative work needs to start earlier.
2. data collection is not reliable or complex enough and interpretation is inadequate
3. evidence on the impact of interventions is patchy
4. there is a clear correlation between low achievement, pupil disengagement and becoming NEET. 80% of NEETs have lower than level 2 qualifications. However there is often little evidence of NEETs' poor basic skills being tackled directly or early enough. Clearly low achievement is the highest risk factor.

From both the school's perspective and that of the LA, dealing with NEETs at age 15+ is expensive and largely unproductive. Early identification and prevention provide the key solutions. **This early intervention has to be embedded first at school level.**

The key, initial, tasks for schools, are therefore:

- **early identification** of pupils who are at risk of disengagement (ideally in, or before, Y7)
- **early and effective intervention** to prevent them becoming disconnected with school and losing self esteem

### **The key role of universal provision**

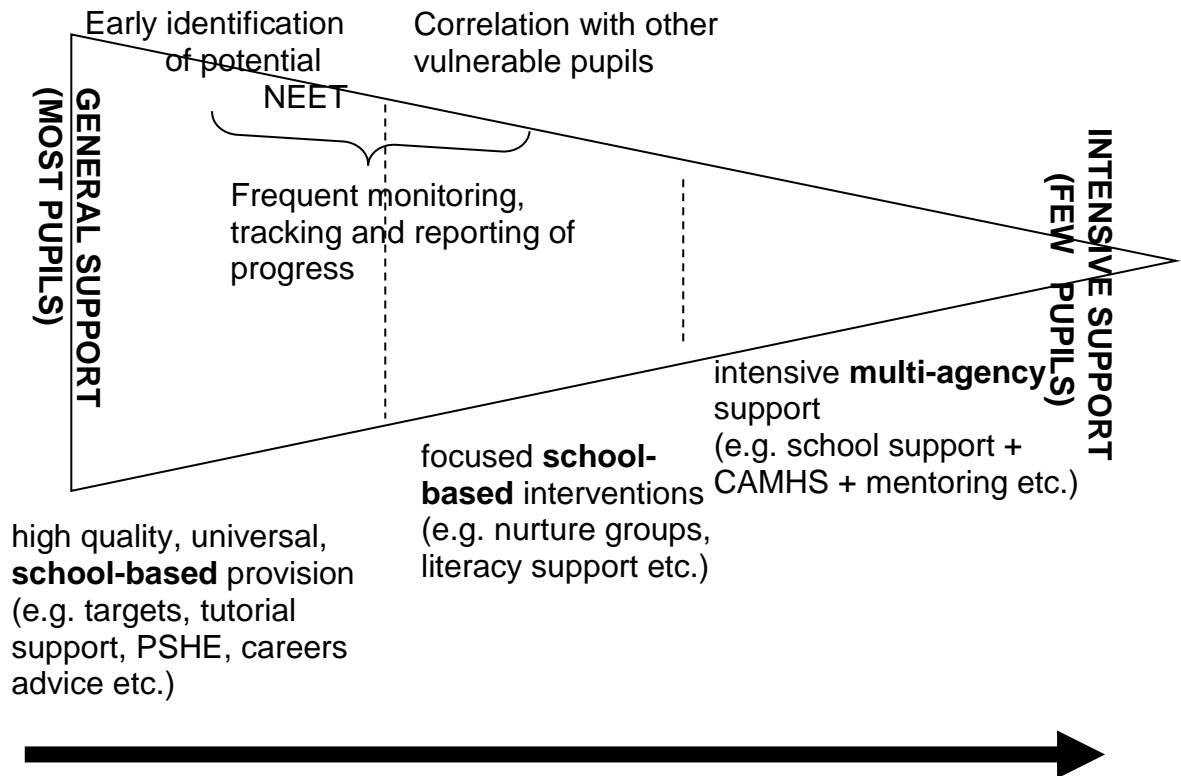
The majority of school-based provision to prevent pupils from becoming disengaged should apply to **all** pupils. For example, **all** pupils should receive high quality personal and social development provision. **All** should have personal targets. The progress of **all** pupils should be tracked systematically and underachieving pupils identified for further support. Too often, pupils who become disengaged miss out on much of this universal provision and, in consequence, slip through the net. Making sure that all pupils receive high quality support and guidance is important in reducing disengagement. **Ensuring that vulnerable pupils receive this provision**, enhanced if necessary, is doubly important, however.

### **The importance of additional, targeted intervention**

Beyond this high quality of universal provision, schools need a range of additional strategies to support vulnerable and potentially disaffected pupils. The

diagram below represents the steady transition from universal to more targeted provision as the level of need increases.

### The application and impact of interventions



Whilst it may be desirable to provide personalised interventions for every pupil, a school's capacity is finite.

Analysis of local data suggests that, for any secondary school, no more than 10 to 15% of pupils from any one groups, are likely to become NEET. In many schools the number is much lower than this.

The focus of proactive intervention therefore needs to be, at most, on the 10 to 15% most vulnerable pupils in the year group. A risk tool that identified, say 40 or 50% in each year group would lead to unmanageable expectations and be a severe drain on the schools resources.

In a similar vein – retaining a high level of monitoring and intervention for a pupil who is making good progress is potentially wasteful. Over time, 'vulnerability' must be defined increasingly by known performance and behaviour and less in relation to 'risk'.

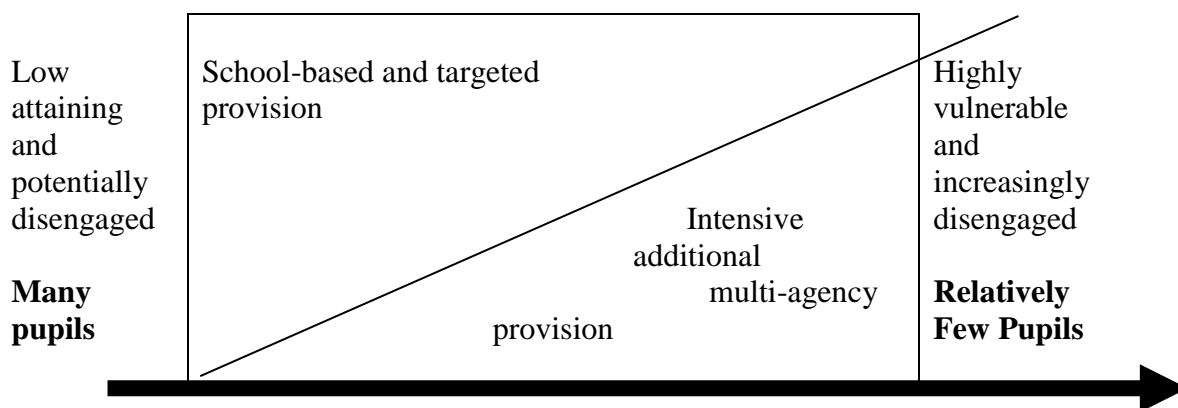
### Broader, differentiated support for complex cases

A small proportion of pupils who are potentially NEET will require additionally resourced provision from external agencies. This will need to be coordinated at school level

The central task is therefore, over time, to reduce the total number of pupils in the school who are considered to be potential NEETs. The effective operation of

- the school's universal provision and
- the school's additional interventions

is expected to ensure that only a small proportion of the school's population receives the intensive support required from external agencies.



### A Framework for Early Identification

The process in outline:

- an annual audit of all pupils should be made, against agreed criteria, to identify those at risk of becoming NEET. **A list of recommended criteria is provided in Section 1.**
- a senior leader in the school should be responsible for and oversee the operation of the school's intervention strategies for potential NEETs and other vulnerable pupils (**see Section 4 for a list of illustrative examples**);
- the awareness of all staff (teaching and support) should be raised to the links between early risk factors and subsequent NEET classification;
- there should be a clear school policy that outlines the roles, responsibilities, trigger points and strategies at each level of intervention;
- effective use should be made of all existing school-based structures e.g. learning mentors, Support Units, Parent Support Advisers, vulnerable-pupil panels (etc.);
- interventions should be regularly monitored for impact and amended if necessary. This should be the responsibility of the senior manager identified in bullet 2 (above).

### The key risk factors.

Below is a list of the risk factors that are used in the risk analysis model shown in **Section 1**. Risks are not all of equal importance. A numerical weighting is given to each risk. The main risk areas are as follows:

1. low and/or underachievement in Key Stage 2
2. social class and poverty
3. being a 'looked after' child

4. gender (boys more likely to disengage than girls but girls more likely to get pregnant!)
5. a history of poor behaviour / exclusion
6. poor attendance (especially below 85%)
7. personal vulnerability / social concerns (e.g. school-based local knowledge about inadequate parenting or a high incidence of bullying)

Factors for which data is readily available, along with a suggested points-scoring system are provided and exemplified in **Section1**

### **The Initial audit and analysis**

As a starting point it is recommended that schools:

- a) carry out a risk assessment of potential NEET/disengaged pupils using the risk factors above and the chart in **Section1**
- b) undertake an audit of the universal provision currently available (and its historical effectiveness) in the school. A schedule of expected universal provision is shown in **Section 2**
- c) correlate: check that the pupils identified in the risk assessment in (a) above are receiving the necessary support and intervention as identified in (b) above.

### **Mapping out responsibility**

1. except in unusual circumstances, where a pupil arrives in secondary school already known to external agencies, responsibility for initial risk identification lies with **the school**
2. **the school** is also responsible for ensuring that its level of universal provision is in line with the recommendations in **Section 2**
3. **the LA** can help with this process by applying the risk factor model to each student in the cohort using data already in the possession of the LA
4. **the school** uses the list of 'high risk' pupils, plus information known at school level, to focus down upon a defined number of targeted pupils in each year cohort (ideally no more than 15%)
5. where targeted pupils make little progress or respond poorly to universal provision and low-level interventions, **the school** should initiate a CAF process with the **LA CAF Team**
6. beyond this point, levels of intervention, additional provision and **multi-agency support** will vary from pupil to pupil in line with the outcomes from the CAF

A diagrammatic representation of this process is provided in **Section3**

## **Section1**

### **Appendix 1: The risk assessment model:**

Below is a list of key factors, an explanation of each factor and its weighting indicated by a point value. An exemplar assessment based on a real set of school data is shown on following page.

#### **Low /under achievement**

- Key stage 2 results below level 4 in English 2 points
- Key stage 2 results below level 4 in maths or science 1 point for each
- A difference between KS1 APS and KS2 APS of 9 or less 3 points

#### **Class/ poverty**

- in receipt of free school meals 1 point

#### **Looked After Status**

- in care 1 point

#### **SEN**

- on the school's SEN register with statement 3 points
- School action plus 2 points
- School action 1 points

#### **Attendance**

- attendance below 85% 3 points
- attendance below 90% 2 points
- attendance below 92% 1 point

#### **Information known to the school**

- being bullied, using drugs, abusive relationships etc. **x points**  
(as appropriate)

#### **Categorisation of outcomes**

- a total of 8 points or above **high risk**
- between 4 points and 7 points medium risk
- below 4 points low risk

#### **An exemplar, trial run of school data**

One secondary school agreed to trail this process with their Y8 pupil data. The above risk factors and points system were applied. The following results were produced.

Total number of pupils	Risk category		
	low	medium	high
295	210	88	45
100%	56%	29%	15%

Thus around 45 pupils were initially identified as potentially high risk. These pupils were subjected to increased levels of monitoring. Some were deemed, in practice, not to be vulnerable. Some received additional, targeted support. Some received intensive support.

Risk Analysis Exemplified

APPENDIX 1

First Name	FSM	Attendance	SEN Stage	LAC	Attendance	Below L4 at KS2 English	Below L4 at KS2 Maths	Below L4 at KS2 Science	Less than 9NC points from KS1 to KS2	Information known to the school	Total Points	Risk
Ann	1	100%	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	N/A	1	Low
Ben	1	97%	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	2	Low
Shannon	1	89%	0	1	2	2	1	0	3	N/A	10	<b>HIGH</b>
Bobby	1	75%	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	N/A	4	Medium
Sabrina	1	90%	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	N/A	2	Low
Sam	1	99%	2	0	0	0	1	0	0	N/A	4	Medium
Amy	0	99%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	0	Low
Harry	0	99%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	0	Low
Alf	1	97%	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	N/A	5	Medium
David	0	100%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	0	Low
Harry	0	100%	0	0	0	0	0	0	N/A	N/A	0	Low
Abigail	0	92%	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	N/A	1	Low

		Section 2 - Universal Entitlement Check List and Action Plan Provision	Y/N	Comments/evidence	Future action
Identification	1	There are clear, shared grading criteria for identifying young pupils who are vulnerable or likely to become NEET.			
	2	Data from primary schools is included in the process of identifying young people who might need additional support.			
	3	Pupil absence records are included in the criteria, in order to identify young people at risk of disengaging.			
	4	There is a lead teacher for NEET with an overview of this area.			
	5	Data sharing is in place and working effectively, e.g. between tutors, curriculum and pastoral leads, Connexions and other agencies. If not, action is being taken to address this			



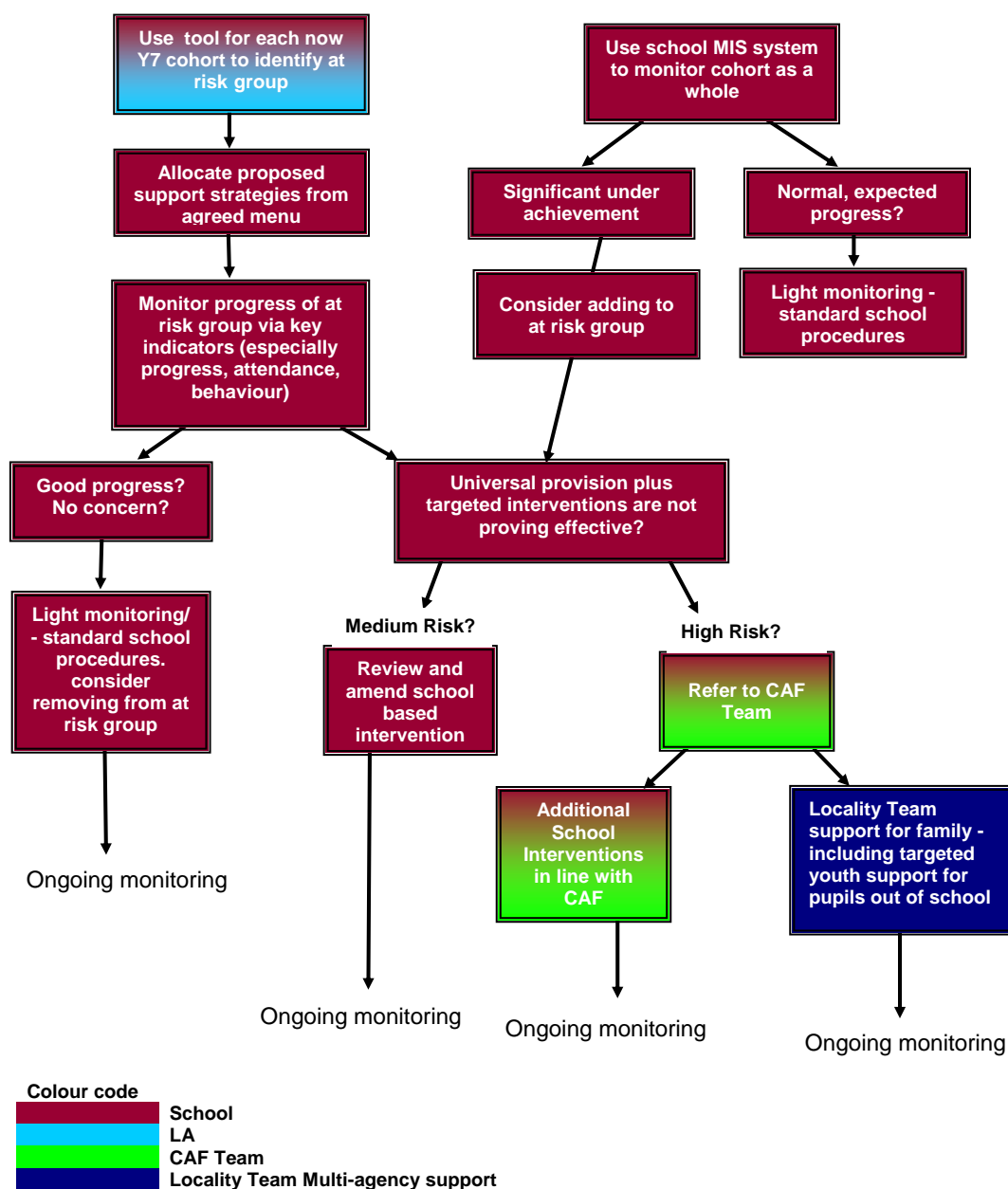
	6	Students' applications for post-16 learning are monitored, so that those who are not applying, or who are unsuccessful, can be identified and given additional support.			
	7	Connexions is routinely notified if a young person drops out of learning. If not, action is being taken to address this			
	8	Systems exist to identify pupils likely to leave learning at the end of Y12, and who are entitled to a further offer of learning.			
<b>Personal development</b>	9	All students have a personal tutor who acts as the main point of contact between school, home and other agencies.			
	10	All tutors have received appropriate training and are able to support students with their personal development, set and monitor personal targets and secure a positive destination.			
	11	There are regular opportunities for parents and careers to receive information about their child's progress at school. Reports refer to personal development as well as attainment.			
	12	All students have access to a comprehensive personal development curriculum which addresses all aspects of the non-statutory framework for PSHEE and Citizenship			
	13	The Careers Education and Guidance programme reflects the National Framework for Careers Education and Guidance			
	14	All students are involved in a SEAL programme			
	15	Access to college taster sessions work placements & universities that can raise aspirations and help with the decision making process.			

	16	All young people are offered high quality work experience. The success of placements are evaluated			
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<b>Information, advice and guidance</b>	17	The annual Connexions activity survey is used by the school to evaluate the effectiveness of support given to young people to make an effective transition to post-16 learning.			
	18	Young people are able to easily access further information, advice and guidance( IAG) in school			
	19	Young people in schools know how to access IAG in the local community (including Connexions Direct and the prospectus)			
	20	Parents/carers are fully involved in transition decisions. Opportunities for parents/ carers to discuss this with the school are explicit.			
	21	Connexions PAs are integrated within schools and provide impartial advice and guidance and more intensive support for the most vulnerable			
	22	Young people's views on IAG are routinely collected and used to develop services.			
	23	The school is aware of its roles and responsibilities in relation to the September Guarantee (and is compliant with them)			
	24	Young people and their parents are made aware of the September Guarantee			
		Extended School services are being explored to support access to further IAG			
	27	EMA is promoted to young people and their parents. Young people and parents are being supported through the application process. Take up of EMA is being monitored			
<b>Pathways</b>	28	The school uses prior attainment data to plan appropriate curriculum provision and pathways			

	29	The school is aware of the range of alternative pathways available to students and effectively supports student's application and transition on to these.			
	30	There is provision for young people who will only consider employment or employer-based learning			
	31	The school's advice and guidance about post-16 transition is focused on each student's needs. There is no automatic assumption that students will continue in their current school.			
	32	The school has an understanding of the local labour market, the jobs available and the needs of employers			
<p> Connexions = Information Advice and Guidance service for 13-19 yr olds (up to 24 yr for LDD)      EMA= Education Maintenance Allowance  IAG = Information Advice and Guidance      PSHE = Personal Social Health Economic Education   SEAL= Social Emotional Aspects of Learning </p>					

### Appendix 3 - Flow Chart and responsibility Mapping



## **Section 4 - Illustrative range of Intervention strategies**

1. High quality universal provision:-
  - personal targets
  - core SEAL
  - pupil tracking, assessment, feedback, etc.
  - high quality IAG, etc.
2. Curriculum-focused interventions
  - literacy support
  - numeracy support
  - 1:1 mentor
  - reading partner, etc.
3. Personal development interventions
  - use of key worker
  - solutions-focused mentoring
  - allocation of personal tutor
  - peer support / buddy systems
  - study skills programme
  - social skills programme, etc.
4. Joint work with parents/carers
  - joint meetings to devise and review strategies
  - learning together programmes
  - joint negotiation of learning goals, etc.
5. Wider, multi-agency approaches
  - Team around the family
  - Personalised plan with regular reviews
  - Interventions informed by external advice, e.g., Connexions targeted personal advisor, etc.

## Appendix 2

### School Questionnaires

#### School Questionnaire 2010

Unique identification number

Tick the box that describes best how you feel about the statement.

	Agree lots	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	disagree	disagree lots
I enjoy school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My teachers like me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like my teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
At 16 I will stay on at school or college	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I will go to University	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like all the subjects I study at school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have a good relationship with my parents/carers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you wanted some advice about your future who/where would you go FIRST?

Parents	Other relatives	Teachers	Careers adviser	Internet	Library
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What is your favourite TV programme?

Who, (celebrity/person,) do you admire most?

Do you belong to a club e.g. football club/drama/theatre group/  
dance troupe/ running club/ guides/ scouts youth club or similar?

	Yes	No
More than once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Once a week	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Once a fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Once a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Less than once a month	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If Yes, how often do you go?

In the last month which of the following have you done? (tick as many as apply)

Do NOT include school trips.

Bowling	<input type="checkbox"/>	Been shopping with friends	<input type="checkbox"/>
Swimming	<input type="checkbox"/>	Eaten at a restaurant	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been to a concert	<input type="checkbox"/>	Vandalised property	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been to the cinema	<input type="checkbox"/>	Travelled by tube	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visited relatives	<input type="checkbox"/>	Been to a zoo	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played in a park	<input type="checkbox"/>	Visited someone in hospital	<input type="checkbox"/>
Done housework other than tidy your room	<input type="checkbox"/>	Stolen money from a family member	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been to a museum	<input type="checkbox"/>	Had a music lesson	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been to the theatre	<input type="checkbox"/>	Been to a family party	<input type="checkbox"/>
Drunk alcohol	<input type="checkbox"/>	Attended a religious service	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spent time at a friend's house	<input type="checkbox"/>	Had an argument with parents or carers	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played a musical instrument	<input type="checkbox"/>	Got a detention	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been to a friend's party	<input type="checkbox"/>	Done some paid work	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been dancing	<input type="checkbox"/>	Used the internet outside of school	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been to a gym	<input type="checkbox"/>	Been to a public library	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played an organised sport	<input type="checkbox"/>	Taken illegal drugs	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played sport in your garden/park	<input type="checkbox"/>	Been to a hospital for treatment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played on a game console on your own	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cared for a relative	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played a game console with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cooked a meal	<input type="checkbox"/>
Played a board game	<input type="checkbox"/>	Stolen something from a shop	<input type="checkbox"/>
Smoked	<input type="checkbox"/>	Slept around a friends house	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been to a football match	<input type="checkbox"/>	Been cycling	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been late for school	<input type="checkbox"/>	Written graffiti	<input type="checkbox"/>

What job would you most like to do?

In five years time will you be:

at University	at College	Working full time	Working part time	Unemployed	an Apprentice	Other (Please state)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

# School Questionnaire 2011

Unique identification number

Tick the box that describes best how you feel about the statement.

	Agree lots	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	disagree	disagree lots
I enjoy school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My teachers like me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like most of my teachers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't really think about what I might be doing in a few years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I will go to University	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have a good relationship with my parents/carers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you wanted some advice about your future who/where would you go FIRST?

Parents	Other relatives	Teachers	Careers adviser	Internet	Library
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Do you belong to a club e.g. football club/drama/theatre group/ dance troupe/ running club/ guides/ scouts youth club or similar?

Yes	No
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	More than once a week	Once a week	Once a fortnight	Once a month	Less than once a month
If Yes, how often do you go?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In the last year how often have you been: (put the number of times in the box) Do NOT include school trips.

Bowling	<input type="text"/>	Been shopping with friends	<input type="text"/>
Swimming	<input type="text"/>	Eaten at a restaurant	<input type="text"/>
Been to a concert	<input type="text"/>	Vandalised property	<input type="text"/>
Been to the cinema	<input type="text"/>	Travelled by tube	<input type="text"/>
Visited relatives	<input type="text"/>	Been to a zoo	<input type="text"/>
Played in a park	<input type="text"/>	Visited someone in hospital	<input type="text"/>
Done housework other than tidy your room	<input type="text"/>	Stolen money from a family member	<input type="text"/>
Been to a museum	<input type="text"/>	Had a music lesson	<input type="text"/>
Been to the theatre	<input type="text"/>	Been to a family party	<input type="text"/>
Drunk alcohol	<input type="text"/>	Attended a religious service	<input type="text"/>
Spent time at a friend's house	<input type="text"/>	Had an argument with parents or carers	<input type="text"/>
Played a musical instrument	<input type="text"/>	Got a detention	<input type="text"/>
Been to a friend's party	<input type="text"/>	Done some paid work	<input type="text"/>
Been dancing	<input type="text"/>	Used the internet outside of school	<input type="text"/>
Been to a gym	<input type="text"/>	Been to a public library	<input type="text"/>
Played an organised sport	<input type="text"/>	Taken illegal drugs	<input type="text"/>
Played sport in your garden/park	<input type="text"/>	Been to a hospital for treatment	<input type="text"/>
Played on a game console on your own	<input type="text"/>	Cared for a relative	<input type="text"/>
Played a game console with others	<input type="text"/>	Cooked a meal	<input type="text"/>
Played a board game	<input type="text"/>	Stolen something from a shop	<input type="text"/>
Smoked	<input type="text"/>	Slept at a friends house	<input type="text"/>
Been to a football match	<input type="text"/>	Been cycling	<input type="text"/>
Been late for school	<input type="text"/>	Written graffiti	<input type="text"/>

What job would you most like to do? .....

Tick the box that best describes the jobs of your Parents / Carers

	Parent/ Carer 1	Parent/ Carer 2
<b>Professional job</b> (e.g. manager, doctor, architect, teacher, lawyer, dentist, accountant, director, nurse ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Other office job</b> (e.g. secretary, clerk, typist, receptionist, civil service, and local government employee ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Senior government or public worker</b> (e.g. inspector, prison governor, customs officer, surveyor ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Store worker</b> (e.g. sales representative, shop sales person ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Hands-on job requiring specialist training</b> (e.g. plumber, electrician, fitter, mechanic, foreman, bus driver or conductor, police officer, fire fighter, agricultural work, chef/cook ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Job needing a small amount of training or experience to start</b> (e.g. hairdresser, beautician, taxi driver, caretaker, teaching or school assistant, childcare worker, nursery nurse ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Job needing no special training</b> (e.g. general labourer, casual worker, lorry driver, window cleaner, domestic cleaner, caterer, hotel or bar staff)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Homemaker</b> (e.g. housewife, househusband)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Unemployed</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Don't know</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>None of the above</b> (write job)	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

List adults and children who live with you	Their age	What do they do most of the time? (e.g. look after children, go to school, stay at home, work part-time, work full-time, volunteer)



## School Questionnaire 2014 (year 12)

Unique identification number

Tick the box that describes best how you feel about the statement.

	Agree lots	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	disagree	Disagree lots
I have made the right course choice for Sixth form	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I enjoy 6 <sup>th</sup> form/college	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am optimistic about my future	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't really think about what I might be doing in a few years	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I will go to University	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I do not want to go to University	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have a good relationship with my parents/carers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In the last **3 months** how often have you been: (put the number of times in the box)

Bowling	<input type="text"/>	Been shopping with friends	<input type="text"/>
Swimming	<input type="text"/>	Eaten at a restaurant	<input type="text"/>
Been to a concert	<input type="text"/>	Vandalised property	<input type="text"/>
Been to the cinema	<input type="text"/>	Travelled by tube	<input type="text"/>
Visited relatives	<input type="text"/>	Been to a zoo	<input type="text"/>
Played in a park	<input type="text"/>	Visited someone in hospital	<input type="text"/>
Done housework other than tidy your room	<input type="text"/>	Stolen money from a family member	<input type="text"/>
Been to a museum	<input type="text"/>	Had a music lesson	<input type="text"/>
Been to the theatre	<input type="text"/>	Been to a family party	<input type="text"/>
Drunk alcohol	<input type="text"/>	Attended a religious service	<input type="text"/>
Spent time at a friend's house	<input type="text"/>	Had an argument with parents or carers	<input type="text"/>
Played a musical instrument	<input type="text"/>	Got a detention	<input type="text"/>
Been to a friend's party	<input type="text"/>	Done some paid work	<input type="text"/>
Been dancing	<input type="text"/>	Used the internet outside of college	<input type="text"/>
Been to a gym	<input type="text"/>	Been to a public library	<input type="text"/>
Played an organised sport	<input type="text"/>	Taken illegal drugs	<input type="text"/>
Played sport in your garden/park	<input type="text"/>	Been to a hospital for treatment	<input type="text"/>
Played on a game console on your own	<input type="text"/>	Cared for a relative	<input type="text"/>
Played a game console with others	<input type="text"/>	Cooked a meal	<input type="text"/>
Played a board game	<input type="text"/>	Stolen something from a shop	<input type="text"/>
Smoked	<input type="text"/>	Slept at a friends house	<input type="text"/>
Been to a football match	<input type="text"/>	Been cycling	<input type="text"/>
Been late for school/college	<input type="text"/>	Written graffiti	<input type="text"/>

Can you choose a few words from these to describe how you see yourself in the future perhaps when you are 27. You can write a few sentences if you prefer.

employed	poor	engaged	working part time	married
single	driver	living with your parents	travelling	in debt
rich	father	mother	dating	stressed
ambitious	living with friends	doing a job you love	living abroad	at university
healthy	having fun	living in the country	living in Barking	successful

What are you studying now?

What job would you most like to do and why?

If a 14 year old was not going to school what would you say to them?

Tick the box that best describes the jobs of your Parents / Carers

	Parent/ Carer 1	Parent/ Carer 2
<b>Unemployed</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Hands-on job requiring specialist training</b> (e.g. plumber, electrician, fitter, mechanic, foreman, bus driver or conductor, police officer, fire fighter, agricultural work, chef/cook ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Senior government or public worker</b> (e.g. inspector, prison governor, customs officer, surveyor ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Store worker</b> (e.g. sales representative, shop sales person ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Office job</b> (e.g. secretary, clerk, typist, receptionist, civil service, and local government employee ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Homemaker</b> (e.g. housewife, househusband)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Job needing no special training</b> (e.g. general labourer, casual worker, lorry driver, window cleaner, domestic cleaner, caterer, hotel or bar staff)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Job needing a small amount of training or experience to start</b> (e.g. hairdresser, beautician, taxi driver, caretaker, teaching or school assistant, childcare worker, nursery nurse ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Professional job</b> (e.g. manager, doctor, architect, teacher, lawyer, dentist, accountant, director, nurse ...)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Don't know</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>None of the above</b> (write job)	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

List adults and children who live with you	Their age	What do they do most of the time? (e.g. look after children, go to school, stay at home, work part-time, work full-time, volunteer)

## Appendix 3

### Appropriate ethical approval documents

How can early identification and subsequent early intervention help reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)?

At School E we used the [redacted] tool to identify pupils at risk in all year groups. We will use this data to instigate interventions and have agreed that these interventions can be interrogated for use within research<sup>1</sup> being conducted by Ann McDonnell in her role as [redacted] and doctoral student at King's College London.

The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) also wanted to further examine pupils' Ambitions Aspirations and Attitudes (using the AAA questionnaire) over a three-year period. We looked at commercial organisations that offered a questionnaire service but felt that they did not suit our purpose. We approached Ann McDonnell who was the instigator of the [redacted] tool to advise us on this issue. It was decided with senior managers that a questionnaire would be devised with advice from Ann McDonnell. As the school wanted pupils to answer the questions honestly, confidentiality and anonymity would be paramount. The pupils were assured that they did not have to participate and the school would not be given pupil level data. To add weight to this Ann McDonnell agreed to administer the questionnaire to the whole year group (no teachers were involved) and to analyse the results, firstly in simple percentage terms and then in more depth using the statistical analysis program SPSS. The questionnaire was rigorously checked and approved by the school's Safeguarding Manager. An explanation of the questionnaire and its aims appeared in the school Newsletter. This included contact numbers of the SMT for parents to ring with any concerns. The SMT at the school did not feel that further parental permission was needed as the school conforms rigorously to all legislation regarding the safeguarding of its pupils, stated as follows:

*The process of protecting children from abuse or neglect, preventing impairment of their health and development, and ensuring they are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care that enables children to have optimum life chances and enter adulthood successfully.*  
<http://www.safeguardingchildren.org.uk/>

Once the results of the questionnaire were presented to the SLT it was decided that in depth discussions or focus groups would aid this work. Again advice was sought from Ann McDonnell who agreed to carry these out on the school's behalf. It was explained to the pupils that their participation was voluntary and anonymous.

[redacted] as part of and on behalf of SLT at School E:

- agree that the results of these questionnaires and focus groups can be included in this research (Reference below)
- take full responsibility for any ethical issues arising from this collection and analysis of data and state that this data collection was carried out with due respect for the pupils and their safety and that pupils were at no time at risk of harm through their participation.

Signed: [redacted]

Date: [redacted]

<sup>1</sup> Ann McDonnell's research is being undertaken under the terms of an ESRC CASE Studentship collaboration between King's College London and [redacted]. The study is entitled 'How can early identification and subsequent early intervention help reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)?' For information on ESRC CASE Studentships see <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/funding-opportunities/2344/case-studentships.aspx>.

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Ann McDonnell



04 July 2011

Dear Ann

**SSHL/07/08-49 How can early identification and subsequent early intervention reduce the number of people not in employment, education or training.**

I am writing with respect to your recently submitted modification request for the above approved research study. To summarise, the request involves the following two changes:

1. Request to undertake interviews with teachers.
2. Request to undertake focus groups with student participants.

I can confirm that the above modification request has now been approved. Please don't hesitate to let me know should you have any queries regarding the above.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Summers'.

Jim Summers  
Research Ethics Team Leader

[www.kcl.ac.uk](http://www.kcl.ac.uk)

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